

Southern Pacific dooms mountain rail service

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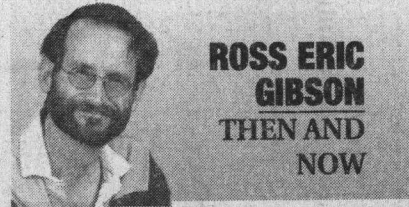
ORIGINALLY SOUTHERN PACIFIC Railway wouldn't extend its service into Santa Cruz County. But by 1881, S.P. wanted attractive tourist destinations for national California promotions. In purchasing the county's 1876 coastal railway, S.P. introduced "the Fishhook," a route from San Francisco to Gilroy, reaching Santa Cruz from the south up through Watsonville.

This was sound, profitable logistics for S.P., although a year too late. For in 1880 James Fair's railway opened its scenic mountain shortcut to Santa Cruz from Los Gatos.

The mountain line was the most expensive narrow-gauge railroad per mile built, yet always enjoyed healthy profits. Mountain freight was a giant industry, yet passenger service out-grossed it by two-thirds in 1887. So that year S.P. President Leland Stanford paid \$51 million for a 55-year lease of Fair's railroad, to expire in 1942. Its excursion trains gained fame as the "Picnic Line."

Following the 1906 quake, the line closed for a three-year conversion to broad-gauge, as local lumbering ran rampant to supply San Francisco's reconstruction. By 1914, exhausted timber resources nearly finished the industry, so excursion-train promotions increased to balance the loss. Santa Cruz was heavily publicized at San Francisco's 1915 world's fair, running the finest show-piece excursion trains.

San Jose agent George Hansen originated the "Suntan Specials" in 1927, which grew to six 10-car excursion trains a day week-



ends (seven on holidays) seating 500 people per train. These reached Santa Cruz via the mountains, terminating at Watsonville Junction.

Hansen dropped round-trip prices to Santa Cruz from \$3 to \$1.25 from San Francisco and Oakland, or 75 cents from San Jose, which kept trains running near capacity during the Depression. Along with 60- to 70-car freights run during the week, author Bruce MacGregor called the line railroading's most efficient and high-capacity operation.

Then in 1940, S.P. sought to replace the mountain line with bus service, switching the Suntan Special to the 1881 Fishhook Route up through Watsonville. S.P. claimed it would cost \$30,000 to repair 1939 mountain storm damage, that the mountain line was losing money, and that the 1940 opening of what is now Highway 17 would hurt business.

County officials rallied to stop S.P.'s plan, saying bus rides were not a promotable tourist draw, and special East Coast charter trains wouldn't book Santa Cruz if a bus was needed to complete the journey. Worse, the one-hour, 60-mile Suntan Special detour made a four-hour run

from San Francisco, leaving only six hours at the beach. The eight-hour round trip didn't always return to San Francisco until 10 p.m.! Mountain resorts not served by major roads faced extinction. Summit businessman Earl La Porte said S.P.'s exaggerated track damage was more like \$5,000, and he'd gladly bid \$1,500 to remove all slides.

When lobbying failed, the area chamber of commerce appointed Jim Maddock to head a fact-finding committee so the city could challenge the abandonment petition before the state Railway and Interstate Commerce committee. Maddock's study convinced the chamber S.P. had other motivations. With freight rates based on the shortest route, abandoning the mountain line made the Fishhook's 60-mile detour the shortest route to Santa Cruz. Rates were already one-quarter higher shipping to San Jose from Santa Cruz, than to San Jose from Seattle!

Judge Harry Bias represented Santa Cruz at the abandonment hearings. Questioning their commitment to the line, Bias got S.P. officials to admit the line wasn't improved to keep pace with competition since 1915. Earl Harris, the chamber's transportation committee head, complained in 1937 that two buses S.P. was running so duplicated existing rail service as to threaten the line's existence.

When S.P. officials admitted to planning abandonment years before the 1939 storm, it raised the implication S.P.'s own buses deliberately depressed their train's ridership figures. S.P. also confirmed the line's loss figures were passenger service only, and did not include profits from freight and

special trains.

S.P. threatened it would discontinue replacement bus service if Santa Cruz continued to seek restored rail service. Abandonment was granted, and W.O. Kerrick announced a competing railroad was interested in the abandoned line. In June 1941, S.P. dismantled the tracks from Los Gatos to the summit. After Pearl Harbor's bombing, S.P. dynamited the mountain tunnels claiming Japanese invaders could use them as bunkers, despite the fact the Army said it wasn't in our military interest to destroy the tunnels.

Indeed World War II brought such heavy war-services rail traffic, it required extensive upgrading of Santa Cruz rail yards. S.P. ended replacement bus service a year later, blaming low ridership, while the new highway suffered several years of bumper-to-bumper traffic due to landslides from construction-exposed earth and lack of rail options.

As convention trains canceled, Santa Cruz tourism was thrown into decline. Fewer 18-car Suntans now took longer than two hours from Los Gatos to Santa Cruz, switching to diesel in 1957. Chuck Wullenjohn reported that with 900 riders per run, the Suntan Special was ended after 1959 not for low ridership but S.P.'s "growing anti-passenger attitude."

Next week: History of rail revivals.

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Seaside Company collection

Bathing beauties Nancy Postel and Louise Wilmot promote the 1938 Suntan Special, which served county mountain and coast resorts.