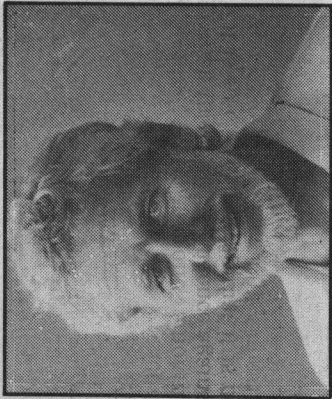


Sauntering on tracks from Santa Cruz to Watsonville

UNLESS YOU ARE a lump of coal, a sack of cement, or a Southern Pacific Railroad employee, you can't ride the train between Watsonville and Santa Cruz. Legally, that is. The last paying passenger passed over the line in September, 1959, when the final summer excursion "Santa Special" left Santa Cruz. I've written the history of the line's construction, walked sections of it, read accounts of those who rode it a hundred years ago, spoken with folks lucky enough to ride it before 1959, and ridden it a hundred times in my imagination. But so far, I have not been able to wangle a ride on the train which shuttles the 18.6 miles three days a week.

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

dream about the tracks.

I started in Santa Cruz and walked east because that was the direction in which they built the railroad. I had no idea how long the walk would take, but one morning I confidently (I would now change that to arrogantly) made a 4 o'clock appointment with a friend in Watsonville, drove my car to the old Santa Cruz depot on Washington Street, and set off. It was 9:30 a.m. A pace between two and three miles an hour would get me to Watsonville in time for appointment. Piece of cake.

SANTA Cruz entrepreneur Frederick A. Hihn knew how important a railroad was to this resource-rich county trapped by gnarly mountains and bumpy seas, and he watched with disappointment as the Southern Pacific Railroad brushed past Watsonville (they didn't pungle up enough cash to lure the line across the river and into town) and turned south into the Salinas Valley in 1872.

Hihn begged Leland Stanford to consider building a connecting line from Santa Cruz to Watsonville, but when the SP engineers estimated the cost of the 20-mile line would exceed \$16,000 per mile, the biggest of the Big Four dismissed the project as "too expensive." Stanford preferred for others to assume the expense and risk of building a railroad. Then he would

drive the road into bankruptcy and
buy it cheap.

Hihn decided to do what most railroaders did — have the public help pay for building the railroad. It is not by chance that the verb “to railroad” means what it does. Hihn took his case to the voters of the county, promising that the line would eventually connect Davenport, Santa Cruz, Soquel, Corralitos and Watsonville. In ex-

Corrales and Watsonville, in exchange for \$6,000 per mile in public support. Watsonville voters immediately noticed that there was nothing in it for them. Voters in Davenport, Soquel and Corralitos will later notice that Hihn flat out lied. Watsonville already had a railroad. Well, almost. So, only 13 of the 408 voters in the Pajaro precinct voted in favor of Hihn's subsidy, echoing the belief of the

Watsonville newspaper editor who said that Hihn had never "done a disinterested act in his life." Then, as now, there were more voters elsewhere in the county and Watsonville was outvoted.

The first narrow-gauge (36 inches wide) rails were laid on the Seabright side of the river by a Chinese railroad crew in December, 1873.

A GROUP of Hayward high school seniors is unloading for its "sneak day" as I walk beside the rails in Beach Street, up onto the right-of-way and out across the 1903 American Bridge Co. trestle. The deep cut through Seabright gives a clue as to why Stanford wanted no part of the construction of the line; the terrain across the county rolls and dips as much as the Giant Dipper I just passed.

one time, he owned the town.

That's why the railroad goes through it. In fact, you can trace the route of the railroad line by what Hihn owned. Never disinterested. One of the biggest drops in the line is the grade down to the Capitola trestle and up again into Aptos. In the 1880s there were days when passengers had to get off the train and walk alongside to allow the locomotive to pull up out of Capitola. On Friday evenings in the summer, trains filled with husbands came into Capitola, the men joining their families over the weekend and then leaving on Sunday evening to go back to work.

THE RAILROAD pulls up out of Capitola and wiggles through a series of curves, past litterstrewn Sealcliff into Aptos.

at 12.00, and I am not even half way to Watsonville. I duck in

to use one of the telephones hanging on the store's outside wall, and she reluctantly agrees. I push my appointment back to 5 o'clock and then quickly slip into the store, buy two very cold root beers, and walk quickly back to the railroad tracks.

□ Into the San Andreas Hills and the highest elevation of the line. Only six miles to go. There are now lots of trestles and cribbing to keep the unstable, sandy soil off the tracks, but here and there are eucalyptus trees which have fallen across the tracks, now looking like beheaded creatures where they have been cut to make room for the train. The sky grows dark with clouds of very aggressive and hungry mosquitoes. I walk faster

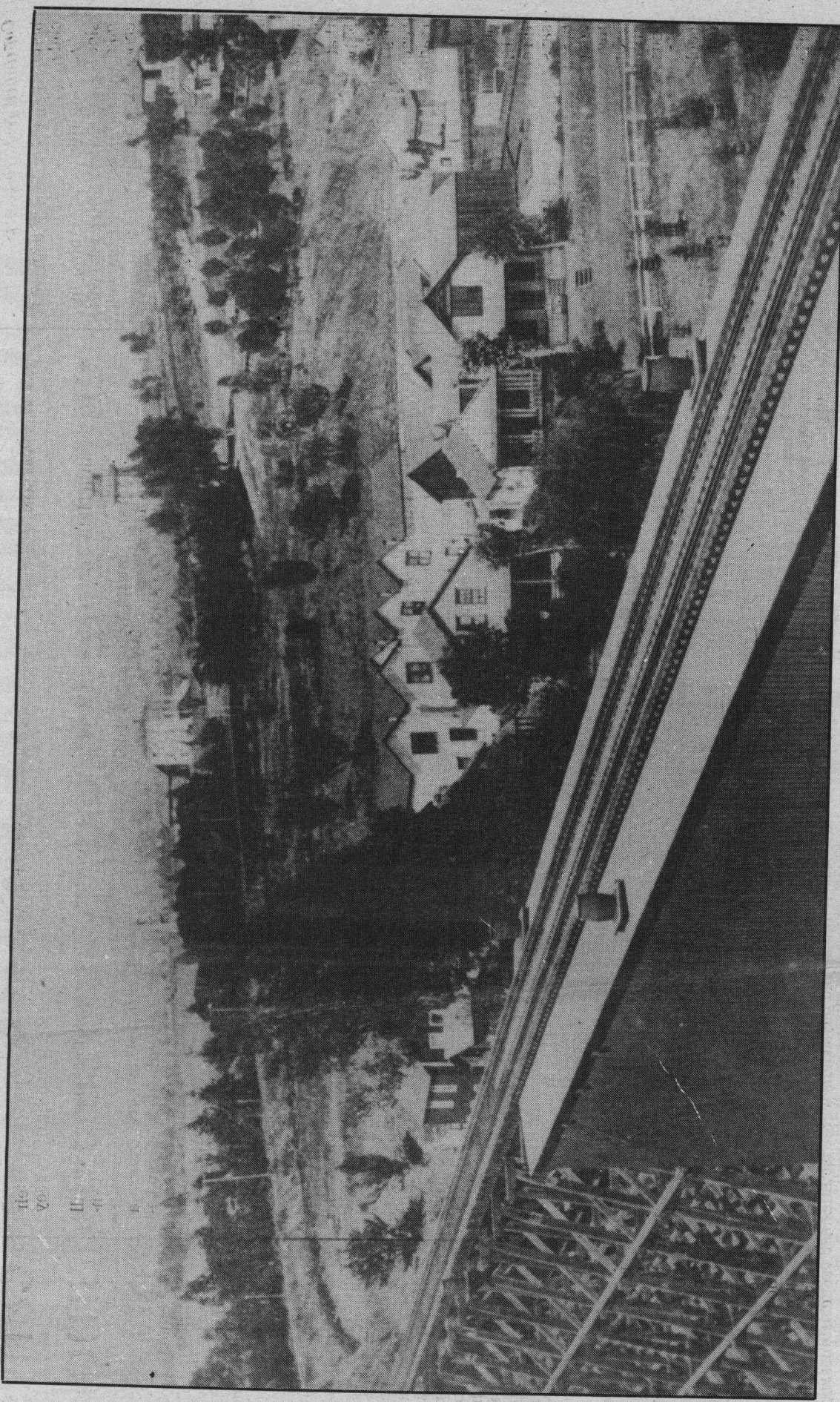
It was in these hills that Frederick Hihn decided to get his revenge on Watsonville. Disinterested? I'll

Cars realize that there's a sweetheart of a transportation solution flitting in and out of the trees along the coast, originally put there by a quarter million dollars of public money?

PAST HIGHWAY 1 and into Watsonville. The tracks multiply to two, three and finally five parallel lines serving the warehouses, cold storage buildings, and canneries. Finally, there's the SP depot and beyond it a telephone. It is 5:05 p.m.

Hihn's Santa Cruz Railroad fell into bankruptcy in 1881 when the San Lorenzo River trestle collapsed. Leland Stanford quickly snapped it up at an auction and folded it into the SP system, broad-gauging it in 1883. Stanford knew the meaning of "railroad" even better than Fred Hihn. I wonder if

The railroad track on the Capitola trestle, circa 1890, curves south heading toward Aptos and the south county.



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Capitola's first railroad trestle, in the distance, was completed in the summer, 1875.

The deep cut through Seabright gives a clue as to why Stanford wanted no part of the construction of the line; the terrain across the county rolls and dips as much as the Giant Dipper I just passed.

The Chinese railroad workers were the great levelers — they cut down hills, filled in the gullies and built a grade that does not exceed 2.5 percent.

I see few people on the tracks today, but there is evidence of heavy use with trails crossing and paralleling the tracks everywhere. Whenever there is room there is trail off to the side beyond the ballast, and after a mile or so I remember why — the ties are not spaced for walking, at least for someone of average leg-length. Already my hips and knees are beginning to complain about the jarring of the ties.

THE PHRASE "Chinaman's Chance" echoes in my mind as I walk through the dozens of cuts. Chinese railroad workers personally subsidized this railroad grade with blood, life and limb. About a dozen Chinese were maimed or killed during the 29 months it took to reach Watsonville, including the horrible tragedy of one worker who had both legs cut off by a runaway construction train in January, 1876. Somehow, he lived through it, and the railroad company officials promised his lifelong support.

All of the mobile homes in Live Oak are lined up in ritual disdain with their rears pointed toward the tracks. The grade crossing at 41st Avenue has the first of two fancy rubber grade crossings. I must be in Capitola. Only Capitola can afford rubber grade crossings.

Hihn would be proud of Capitola's prosperity because at

THE RAILROAD pulls out of Capitola and wiggles through a series of curves, past litterstrewn Seacliff into Aptos.

It's 12:30, and I am not even half way to Watsonville. I duck in through the Wharf Road fence, grab a sandwich, and run into a friend who offers to drive me to Watsonville.

THE RAILROAD now begins, subtly, to climb. A long, straight stretch runs alongside Sumner Avenue and my knees suggest that they might like to walk on the smooth pavement for awhile. But no. This is a railroad walk. Across Clubhouse Drive and through a long straight stretch of Vias (Via this and Via that) on the left with park-like Monterey pines on the right.

Seascape ends. A dozen Mexican farm laborers are bent over, pulling up broccoli seedlings for transplanting. There's no transition from suburban Seascape to the tractors, fertilizers, sprinklers and field workers.

It's past 2 o'clock. The drop-dead views of the La Selva section keep my mind off the six-part harmony being sung by ankles, knees and hips. The stiff wind blowing east along the beach has cleared all but one couple away and they are hunkered down behind a log.

There's one, last fail-safe telephone at the KOA campground. I can still get out of this.

ACROSS THE TRESTLE at San Andreas Road and trudge (striding has now changed to trudging) up the long slope to Spring Valley Road. The woman in the KOA booth says I can't go to the store. "It's a private campground and private store. Only KOA campers can go to the store," she explains. I ask

clouds of very aggressive and hungry mosquitoes. I walk faster.

It was in these hills that Frederick Hihn decided to get his revenge on Watsonville. Disinterested? I'll show you disinterested. His plan was simple, and as I walk down the straight stretch which drops the railroad into the Pajaro Valley, I can see it — the tracks point straight across the river. Hihn intended to bypass Watsonville completely, by crossing the Pajaro River about a mile downstream from town and then slipping up the valley to meet the SP at Pajaro.

IT TOOK the considerable weight of Charles Ford, other Watsonville businessmen, and the courts to force Hihn to turn into Watsonville, but not before he extorted \$8,000 worth of free property for a depot and a right-of-way down Walker Street. Hihn was learning to be a railroader. Protesting and grumbling, the tracks make a long, sweeping curve to the left, cross Harkins Slough and make a bee-line for Watsonville.

The wind pushes hard at my back carrying bits of a Mexican song from a nearby lettuce harvester which lumbers through the field like a huge rack of voting booths filled with walking voters.

As I walk beneath the River of Cars overcrossing I remember how the bridge just north of here collapsed in October, 1989, demonstrating to us all the vulnerability of highways and cars. I also remember how quickly the SP was able to get passenger service into place in the Santa Clara Valley after the earthquake. The earthquake gave us an instant preview of the critical mass which will eventually come on our local highways. How long must the delays be before folks trapped in the River of

snapped it up at an auction and folded it into the SP system, broad-gauging it in 1883. Stanford knew the meaning of "railroad" even better than Fred Hihn. I wonder if SP assumed Hihn's responsibility for the Chinese railroad worker with no legs. There is no record of him after 1883.

Sandy Lydon is an author on matters historical and teaches local and regional history at Cabrillo College.