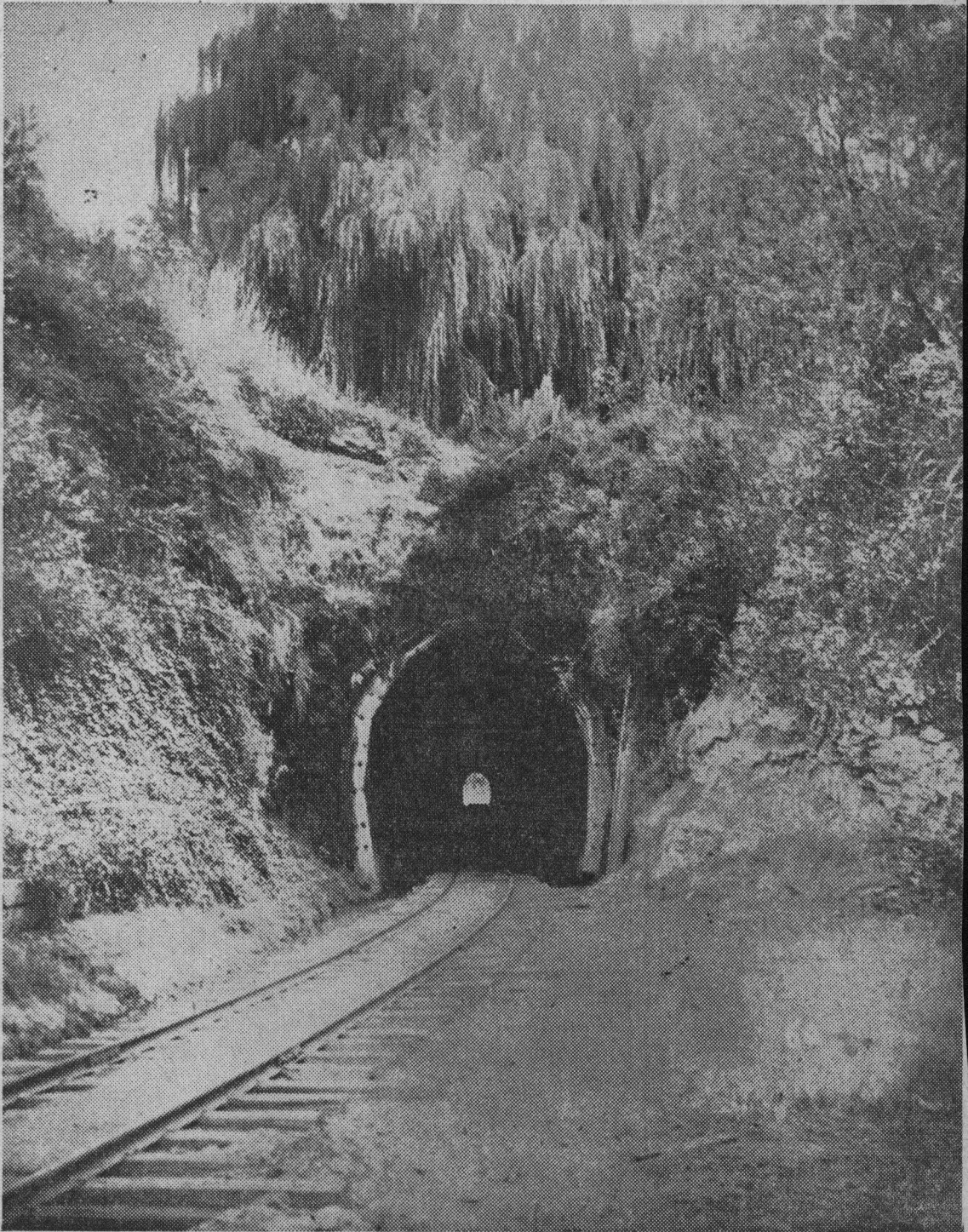


Santa Cruz Yesterdays

Sawyer. Preston



SMALL GAUGE BORE IN MISSION HILL

(From the Preston Sawyer Collection)

Irish born Michael Owen Boyle was hale and hearty despite his 70 years and the white in his mop of chin whiskers when, in 1875, he took the contract to dig a tunnel through Mission Hill for the Santa Cruz & Felton railroad.

The narrow gauge line, promoted by home town men but financed by Santa Clara county interests which owned timber up the San Lorenzo valley, had run its first train on October 9.

The tracks came down from the north to the potrero, skirted the hill and ran down Pacific avenue to the beach.

Boyle, who had had a successful career as a general contractor in New York and New England before he came around the Horn in 1850, had mined a couple of years at Columbia, in Tuolumne county, but had gone back to New York in 1852 to bring to California five children recently made motherless.

Hometown Contractor

When two little pioneer railroads began building from Santa Cruz, one to Felton and the other to Watsonville, Boyle was already a

resident here, having constructed a water reservoir on the hill above High street.

The Mission Hill tunnel was the major piece of engineering called for by the line run by Surveyor Thomas Wright.

By the spring of 1876 the bore was complete, wide enough and high enough for the narrow gauge train. It remained that size until after the earthquake of 1906 when the Southern Pacific enlarged it as the tracks over the hill from Los Gatos were made standard gauge.

Completion of the little tunnel in 1876 sent the trains through it and down Chestnut avenue. The tracks down Pacific avenue were put to use for a horse car line.

Railroad Builder

Boyle was one of the contractors for F. A. Hihn and his associates in moving dirt for the grade of the Santa Cruz-Watsonville line. He had returned to make his home in Santa Cruz after five years residence in Los Angeles during which he had visited Arizona, Nevada, the Fraser river country and the Panamint region of southern California. His visits to new mining regions had been as a contractor rather than as a miner. He had helped build parts of the first transcontinental railroad. One legend is that he had built in the 60s Sandy Bowers' famous stone mansion on the shore of Washoe lake, in Nevada, but there is no authentication.

Boyle was 85 years old when he died in his home on Mission street in 1890. The five children he had brought around the Horn in 1852 survived him. Mrs. Alice Higgins, wife of a druggist in Anaheim, was

a doctor. Two other daughters, Mrs. William Culverwell and Mrs. Mansell V. Bennett, were in Santa Cruz. A fourth was sister superior of a hospital in Indianapolis. The one son, Charles, was in Montana.

Taken shortly after the turn of the century, the picture shows the quaint south portal of the tunnel, shaped much like a horseshoe. For years the narrow gauge depot was close by, at Park street, now Union.