

# Our little train that could



Photo: Courtesy Geoffrey Dunn Collection. Photo restoration: Barry Brown.

This photo was taken by William Nutting Tuttle circa 1878, near the base of the present-day Chestnut Street Extension. For the first time, the Jupiter's engineer, Elvin F. Mynatt (left), and fireman Frank Ely (center), have been identified. The residence in the background belonged to W.P. Young. The man on right is believed to be member of Blaisdell family; unconfirmed.

By Geoffrey Dunn

The completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, marked a transformative moment in U.S. history — economically, politically and culturally.

In Santa Cruz, then a small community of some 2,500 people, the historic merger of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads spurred dreams of its own transportation glories and an end to the very real geographic isolation that had constrained the region's economy since the founding of the mission here in the 1790s.

The biggest local dreamer of them all was German immigrant Frederick Augustus Hihn, who had come to California during the Gold Rush in the fall of 1849.

Hihn arrived in Santa Cruz in 1851 and quickly established a thriving mercantile business at what is now the triangular juncture of Front Street and Pacific Avenue. Hihn's drive and business acumen were soon to make him one of the most wealthy and influential figures in all of Central California during the latter half of the 19th century.

Hihn was a state legislator, established the City of Capitola, forested vast tracts of land throughout the Soquel

and Aptos Creek watersheds and founded the City Savings Bank of Santa Cruz. Along the way, he and his family became real estate tycoons. His land holdings in the county were estimated at 15,000 acres. In the parlance of the day, Hihn was an entrepreneurial argonaut.

In 1872, Hihn and his investors (including sugar king Claus Spreckels) incorporated the Santa Cruz Rail Road Co. (SCRR) and pushed a plan for county voters to subsidize a narrow-gauge line to the tune of \$6,000 per mile, linking Santa Cruz with Watsonville. The editor of the Watsonville Pajaronian, C. O. Cummings, called it a "swindle" and "fraud."

Built almost exclusively by Chinese labor, the SCRR began operations in 1874, and, two years later, in May of 1876, brought its third and most celebrated steam engine to the line, the Jupiter, built by the Baldwin Locomotive Works of Pennsylvania.

By all accounts, the Jupiter was a glorious little narrow-gauge steam engine. With four smaller wheels up front to guide the train over curving and uneven track, the wood-fueled Jupiter was handsomely finished in "lake





Photo: Courtesy Pajaro Valley Historical Association.

Chinese railroad workers, presumed to be working on railroad spur, Loma Prieta Railroad Lumber Co., circa 1885.

and gold" filigree striping, with a cabin made of polished walnut. Engineered to carry a load of more than 500 tons on level track, the Jupiter was capable of reaching speeds of up to 50 mph, though along the local line, speeds of 25 to 40 mph were the norm.

For the better part of six years, the Jupiter hauled freight and passengers between Santa Cruz and Watsonville, becoming a beloved figure cutting across the county's largely rural landscape.

But the love affair was to be short-lived. The SCRR was an economic failure. By 1881, it was sent into receivership, and, by 1883, it was over. Stanford's Southern Pacific monopoly scooped up the beleaguered SCRR, turning the Santa Cruz and Watsonville line into a standard gauge rail.

An account in the Santa Cruz Surf documented the bittersweet adieu.

"The Jupiter, by a long and loud whistle crossed the trestle at the mouth of the (San Lorenzo River), Saturday evening (Nov. 10, 1883), at 8:30 o'clock, and bade farewell to the city to which it had been a daily visitor for the past six years."

The bigger, broader-gauge Southern Pacific, with a 31-ton engine known only as No. 14, commenced rail operations the following day.

It was not, however, the end of the line for the Jupiter. Not by a long shot.

In 1885, the engine was sold to the narrow-gauge Ferrocarril Guatemala Central Railroad, on which it ran until 1960 in the remote Ocos region along the Pacific Coast of northwest Guatemala.

Even then, the Jupiter's intrepid career was not over.

The owner of the Guatemala line, Roy Chalk, also owned the Washington, D.C., Transit System, and, in 1965, he brought the Jupiter to the John F. Kennedy Playground in the nation's capital for young children to enjoy and admire.

With the coming of the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976, curators at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History set their sights on the Jupiter for the museum's bicentennial celebration. It was of perfect vintage for the exhibit and it was resplendently restored.

Then in November of 2003, the Jupiter became the centerpiece of the Smithsonian's "America on the Move Exhibit," with the communities of both Santa Cruz and Watsonville — and the role that railroads played in their economic and social development — prominently featured.

In September, with the closing of the exhibit and a long-planned renovation of the Smithsonian's American history wing, the Jupiter received a well-deserved rest.

But don't count the little engine out for long. By the summer of 2008, when the Smithsonian's National Museum reopens its doors, the invincible Jupiter will resume its place at center stage in our nation's transportation history.

*Geoffrey Dunn is an award-winning journalist, filmmaker and historian. He is the author of "Santa Cruz Is in the Heart" and the editor of "Chinatown Dreams." He would like to thank Stanley D. Stevens, Coordinator, Hahn-Younger Archive, Special Collections, UCSC, for research assistance with this article.*