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Santa Cruz trolley number 2, the twin to No. 1, which is being restored for use in San Jose.

Trolley car brought back to life

By STEVE STROTH

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It didn't look much like a Santa Cruz trolley car any more, but Bill Hunter could see that it was one.

A portion of the 80-year-old rail car had been sawed off and the two parts built into an L-shaped, "chicken-coop apartment."

For more than half a century, it had served as a rental apartment in the back yard of a house on the ocean end of Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz.

It had been abandoned, no doubt, around 1926, along with 22 other electric-powered trolley cars that served Santa Cruz and Capitola for more than 30 years around the turn of the century.

Its wheels had long since disappeared, and its once dark-blue color with gold-leaf lettering had been buried under coat after coat of paint. Termites and other insects had made it a home for decades.

The 40-foot Union Traction Company car No. 1 wasn't worth anything to anybody except Hunter, a San Jose rail enthusiast and trolley restorer.

Hunter pulled the old trolley car from its backyard resting place in January 1986. When he did, Hunter said this week, he knew he was looking at a piece of Santa Cruz history long forgotten, but from an age fondly remembered.

"They weren't just a piece of transportation," Hunter said of the Victorian-era electric trolleys. "They were beyond that. The old street cars were decorated exquisitely. They were built for a special purpose — to make you want to ride them."

That's what Hunter has in mind now for the Union Traction No. 1, the once-luxurious open-air rail car he said looks "just like a San Francisco cable car." Hunter told of his plans for the old street car last week at a meeting of the Santa Cruz County Historical Trust.

The Santa Cruz trolley is one of six being restored by the non-profit San Jose Trolley Corporation for use on downtown San Jose's light-rail system, slated for completion later this year. Two cars are from the old San Jose system, and three more will come from Sacramento, Milan, Italy and

Melbourne, Australia.

The restored rail cars won't be used for commuter traffic, but will make excursion runs through downtown San Jose, Hunter said.

San Jose is a city with a multi-million dollar redevelopment project downtown and where many new skyscrapers are being built. Hunter said politicians are hoping the old trolley cars will bring a "heart" to a city of concrete.

"We feel it will add a lot to our downtown," he said. "What they're going to do is bring some color to the city."

'The old street cars were decorated exquisitely. They were built for a special purpose — to make you want to ride them.'

"People today still enjoy that sort of transportation, and they enjoy it for the sheer pleasure of riding," Hunter said.

Two cars have already been restored, and the Santa Cruz car, which resembles ones used in the 1930s in San Jose, is expected to be completed about this time next year, Hunter said.

The restoration is being done by Hunter and a small group of volunteers — and several million dollars from the Santa Clara County Transit District. The cars belong to the trolley corporation and will be leased back to the district for \$1 a year.

Hunter, 48, is a former Silicon Valley engineer who gave up the high-tech life to become assistant manager of the restoration effort two years ago.

Now he spends his days tearing apart dilapidated trolley cars and rebuilding them. It's quite a chore.

To get the two parts of the Union Traction No. 1 to the restoration workshop at the San Jose Historical Museum, Hunter used a large crane to lift each section over a building and onto a truck.

"That's the first time that end had been connected to the main part in more than 60 years," Hunter said.

Once in the shop, the trolley was fumigated and dismantled. Rotten wood was torn away along with the additions built on over the years.

"In a job like this it gets a lot worse before it gets better," Hunter said.

Restorers had no idea where the trolley car had come from or how it had gotten to its Pacific Avenue location, which was just half a block from where the old trolley barn that housed the 23 Union Traction Co. cars was located until the 1920s.

Sanding by hand, Hunter and several volunteers went through layer after layer of paint — "sanding our fingerprints off" — until they found the original identification numbers.

The numbers indicate the trolley was built in 1903 in Sacramento and then sold to the newly formed Union Traction Co. in Santa Cruz in 1907, Hunter said. It was one of five cars brought to Santa Cruz from Sacramento when Union Traction took over operations of the Santa Cruz Electric Railway and the Santa Cruz, Capitola and Watsonville Electric Railway. The No. 1 was scrapped in 1923.

The discovery was exciting, Hunter said, because it helped write undocumented pages of rail history for Santa Cruz County.

Finds on other trolley cars have included old movie posters, trolley tokens and even Wrigley's gum wrappers.

"It's amazing. Nothing goes away," Hunter said. "If you work real hard, you can use it."