



140 Years of Railroading in Santa Cruz County

By Rick Hamman

Introduction

To describe the last 140 years of area railroading in 4,000 words, or two articles, seems a reasonable task. After all, how much railroad history could there be in such a small county?

In the summer of 1856 Davis & Jordon opened their horse powered railroad to haul lime from the Rancho Canada Del Rincon to their wharf in Santa Cruz. Today, the Santa Cruz, Big Trees & Pacific Railway continues to carry freight and passengers through those same Rancho lands to Santa Cruz. Between the time span of these two companies there has been no less than 37 different railroads operating at one time or another within Santa Cruz County. From these various lines has already come sufficient history to fill at least eight books and numerous historical articles. Many of these writings are available in your local library.

As we begin this piece the author hopes to give the reader an overview and insight into what railroads have meant for Santa Cruz County, what they provide today, and what their relevance could be for tomorrow.

Before There Were Railroads

As people first moved west in search of gold, and later found reason to remain, Santa Cruz County offered many inducements. It was already well known because of its proximity to the former Alta California capital at Monterey, its Mission at Santa Cruz and its excellent weather. Further, within its boundaries were vast mineral deposits in the form of limestone and aggregates, rich alluvial farming soils and fertile orchard lands, and billions of standing board feet of uncut pine and redwood lumber to supply the construction of the San Francisco and Monterey bay areas. All that was needed was a way to transport people and materials. Thus, as the area entered the early 1860's, local stage and freight lines were found in operation, wharves had been established around Monterey Bay at Santa Cruz, Soquel, Aptos, Pajaro, Moss Landing and Monterey, and local sloops, schooners, sailing ships and small steamships plied the deep waters.

Early local stage transportation was usually provided by McLaughlin's daily Concord Coaches. A typical trip to San Francisco left Santa Cruz at 5:00 A.M. and stopped at points like Soquel, Aptos and Watsonville on the way to San Juan (Bautista). Usually that stage met the Monterey to San Jose stage at 1:00 P.M. in San Juan for the

final leg of the trip via Gilroy. The next morning you were on William Hall's stage to Alviso where you made connections with the steamship Sophie McLane for the 9:00 A .M., four-hour trip to San Francisco. If you were a more hearty soul you took McLaughlin's stage from San Jose up the Peninsula to San Francisco for a second full day's travel. The cost, not including the overnight in San Jose, was \$2.00 each way.

Famed team handler Charley Parkhurst (found to be a woman at death) was one of the excellent whip's for McLaughlin. In later years when Hall operated the stage line, the "Incomparable Henry Whinnery" was usually the driver. Likewise, early famous whips turned proprietors; Ward & Colgrove, were offering an exhilarating, short-cut ride over the mountains by the late 1860's. It was a great trip on warm summer days, but terrible during the winter. If you were more inclined to comfortable passage in your own stateroom, and could pay the fare of \$5.00 to \$9.00 each way, you could go by steamship. Davis & Jordoti's Santa Cruz and Queen of the West left the wharf at 9:00 P.M. and had you in San Francisco the following morning by 5:00 AM. After a full day of business you could reboard at 2:00 PM and be back in Santa Cruz by 10:00 PM that same night. The 157 ton steamship, Salinas, under captain Robert Sudden's watchful eye, provided similar service from Brennan's Landing up Elkhorn Slough (later Port Watsonville), Moss Landing and Soquel.

Railroad Links Whispered

After almost fifteen years of planning, reorganization, and sporadic construction, the San Francisco and San Jose Railroad was completed in January of 1864 between the same named cities. While it greatly reduced travel times for local and long distance travelers, its high cost kept other services in operation. In 1865 the Southern Pacific Railroad Company was incorporated to build that portion of the Atlantic & Pacific transcontinental line between San Francisco and the Southern California/Arizona Territory border at the Colorado River. The original map indicated the line would be routed along the coast to Santa Cruz, on to Aptos, over to Watsonville and then south down the Salinas Valley.

By 1868 the hopes for a railroad in Santa Cruz County had been dashed. The Southern Pacific had been taken over by Central Pacific interests (Crocker, Hunington, Hopkins and Stanford) and had purchased the San Francisco & San Jose. Their planned route were now south from San Jose to Gilroy, on to Hollister and then Bakersfield.

Connections Everywhere

The Southern Pacific plans, however, were far greater than any imagined. They incorporated the Western Pacific to build from the Central Pacific at Sacramento, to Stockton, Tracy and San Jose. They went north into Oregon, and south down the San Joaquin Valley. Later to be known as the "Octopus", they laid out lines everywhere. One of those lines, the 45 mile California Southern, was set up to build from Gilroy via Pajaro to Salinas. On November 21st, 1871 the first scheduled train left Pajaro for San Francisco.

During the years from 1865 to 1871 much talk and planning had gone on by local folks regarding the need for a railroad into Santa Cruz County to get the wheels of industry and commerce moving. Lead by Fred Hihn, a railroad committee had been formed in 1869 to pursue such a railroad. After much discussion, debate and an approved ballot measure, the County came out in support of the Santa Cruz & Watsonville Railroad around

the time service to Pajaro began. The plan: the County would finance it, the Southern Pacific would take it over.

To shorten a very complicated piece of important history, suffice it to say that a nationwide financial panic found the Southern Pacific over-extended in 1873. Its plans to build south beyond Hollister were put on hold. Other plans to be part of the Santa Cruz to Watsonville Railroad were canceled.

This left the County of Santa Cruz again without a railroad. Undaunted, Fred Hihn convinced the local folks to build the railroad themselves. Rather than building it as a standard gauge line like the Southern Pacific (4 ft, 8 inches between the rails) he opted to make the line narrow gauge (3 ft. between the rails). This meant the line could be built for much less because the cars and engines were lighter and the track and structures required underneath them were much less substantial.

On May 16th, 1875 the first revenue train in the county ran from Santa Cruz to Aptos. Starting on the weekend of May 22nd, fifty cent excursion service between the same points began. It was hoped that full service to Watsonville and Pajaro would be in effect by January 1st of 1876. Unfortunately, one very bad rainy season later, the first through train finally did happen on May 7th, 1876. Thus, the Santa Cruz Railroad, as it had come to be known, was a reality.

At the same time the 21 mile Santa Cruz Railroad was under construction, another 7 mile narrow gauge railroad from Santa Cruz to Felton was also being built. The Santa Cruz & Felton as it was known had already begun its service between the same named communities in mid October of 1875. In addition to the railroad, a 1378 ft. wharf had been built at Santa Cruz along with an eight mile flume from Felton to the Cunningham Mill above Boulder Creek. By the time the Santa Cruz Railroad began its operations, lumber had been going from the Cunningham Mill to waiting ships at the wharf in Santa Cruz, over the SC&F, for many months.

While the Santa Cruz Railroad seemed like a good idea, several factors would cause its downfall. First, being a different gauge than the Southern Pacific at Pajaro meant that cars were not interchangeable and all freight and passengers had to be transferred to different trains at Pajaro. Likewise, the Pacific Coast Steamship Company, a major California coastal water carrier, was offering better freight rates at the wharf in Santa Cruz than was any joint rate offered by the Santa Cruz/Southern Pacific combination. Therefore, it saw very little freight business. Finally, a bad storm in 1881 and poor financial conditions forced the Santa Cruz Railroad to sell to the Southern Pacific at a loss. It should be noted that a similar narrow gauge railroad, the Monterey & Salinas Valley, was built between the Southern Pacific at Salinas and the wharf at Monterey on the opposite side of the Bay at about the same time. It suffered the same fate for the same reasons.

Big Money Comes to Town

As soon as the Southern Pacific took over the lines around Monterey Bay they pumped in lots of capital. Replacing the rails with standard gauge made both lines more competitive. Through freight and passenger trains serving Santa Cruz, Soquel/Camp Capitola, Aptos and Watsonville were in operation to San Francisco by November of 1883. At last, Santa Cruz County had its primary connection. Actually, they had two such connections.

Comstock millionaires James Flood and James Fair became well aware of the wealth of Santa Cruz County as they planned for a narrow gauge railroad to Colorado back in 1876. Thus, it was decided that rather than end

their railroad in San Francisco, they would extend it from Alameda, down the east side of San Francisco Bay to Santa Clara, west to Los Gatos and then through the Santa Cruz Mountains to Santa Cruz. Rather than build unnecessary new lines, they would take over the Santa Cruz & Felton. Fair knew, because of his mining engineer experience, he could put in 12,000 feet of tunnels, keep the summit down to 900 feet and cut 40 rail miles out to Santa Cruz. Suffice it to say the line, the South Pacific Coast, was in place by May of 1880. For a two year period it was actually possible to ship a narrow gauge carload all the way from Watsonville to San Francisco via the Santa Cruz and South Pacific Coast railroads.

With two railroads and the Pacific Coast Steamship Company providing local freight and passenger competition for many years, the economy of Santa Cruz County was that much better off. The multiple service, forcing freight rates lower, allowed local shippers to compete effectively with their counterparts from other areas and markets within California.

Growth and Expansion

Once good rail service had been established into and out of Santa Cruz County the resources therein were accessible for the tremendous growth and expansion taking place within the state. There was black powder from the California Powder Works on the San Lorenzo, lime from Davis & Cowell and the Santa Cruz Lime Company, and clay for bricks from the Santa Clara Valley Mill & Lumber Company. And of course there was lumber.

While there were several small independent lumber companies, the Dougherty Brothers of San Jose (Santa Clara Valley Mill & Lumber Company) had a basic lock on the Northern Santa Cruz Mountains. From 1881 to 1887 their mill at Zayante fed 20 to 40 carloads a day to the South Pacific Coast. From 1887 until 1914, after the South Pacific Coast extended their line seven miles from Felton to Boulder Creek, the SCVM&Co. harvested most of the first growth trees in the San Lorenzo Basin. During this time they built their own six mile line known as the Boulder Creek & Pescadero to service that cutting. The Dougherty's also had the ear of Timothy Hopkins and the Southern Pacific interests regarding the southern mountains. In 1883, the seven mile long Aptos Creek Canyon lay basically virgin. Under the name of the Loma Prieta Lumber Company and the Loma Prieta Railroad, they started out of Aptos and for the next fifteen years harvested the Canyon. Likewise Fred Hihn & Co. were harvesting the Valencia Creek Canyon, or the adjacent ridge. Hihn built his own railroad (narrow gauge) from the mill into downtown Aptos. These two operations put Aptos on the map as a significant freight junction.

Fred Hihn would also harvest the majority of the upper Soquel out of his Laurel mill and the Gold Gulch Canyon at Felton. Both locations had their own railroads.

A historical note should be made here. Many ecologists of today cry clear cutting ruined the forests. For the most part, the local forests were not clear-cut. When a mill was constructed, economies dictated a mill be constructed to cut large trees or small trees. For the big companies it was the large trees. Once these were cut the forest floor was opened up to light that their branches had hidden. This made all the small trees grow. Today, there are three times as many full growth trees as there used to be, albeit a lot smaller.

Freight, of course, was not the only business. The attraction of the beaches and the surrounding forests was a natural passenger draw. Camp Capitola, Spreckel's Aptos Hotel, the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, the Big Trees, all kept the passenger trains loaded.

By the turn of the century, Southern Pacific had taken over the South Pacific Coast and Santa Cruz County would see nothing but continued growth.

As Santa Cruz County turned the page to a new century, the year 1900 promised nothing but continued growth and expansion for the Central Coast Region. The primary mode of modern transportation was the railroad and the local area was well represented. The Southern Pacific already had outstanding standard gauge freight and passenger service around Monterey Bay. Through connecting service to San Jose, San Francisco, Oakland and all points east was being provided by passenger trains with all steel cars, pulled by high wheeled, fast-stepping, American type steam locomotives. Such trains were routinely seen charging down the track at the break neck speed of 60 miles per hour. In just a short three decades, travel time from Santa Cruz County to San Francisco had been reduced from days to hours. Likewise, the economic wheels of commerce and industry moved ever faster and in larger capacity.

In addition to standard gauge via the Salinas, Pajaro and Santa Clara Valleys, the Southern Pacific was also operating the pristine narrow gauge through the Santa Cruz Mountains. Daily trains were crewed by well known locals like Engineer Bill Dow; Fireman Fred Reynolds; Baggage man Brick Roy and Conductor Daisy Holienback. Holienback, who used to wear a daisy in his coat lapel, was so well known that the Santa Cruz Sentinel and the Boulder Creek Mountain Echo used to routinely refer to his train as the Daisy Flyer.

Imagine, there was local train service available to most of the major population centers in the county. In addition, frequent stops included forgotten places such as Hatchery, Brackney, Quail Hollow and Siesta on the Boulder Creek Branch. What about Clem's, Dougherty's, Eccles or Rincon on the hill line. Then, of course, there was Branciforte, Ellicott, and San Andreas on the coast run via Aptos. Lastly, let's not forget Molino and Ready on the Aptos Creek Branch.

The impact of the bus, truck and automobile was 20 years away. Anybody who was on top of the technology of the day knew about trains. Boys dreamed of being engineers. Girls dreamed of the places where these ornate conveyances could take them. People in general viewed trains as part of the community. They saw them as the logical way to move large quantities of people and freight long distances, for a reasonable investment. Trains represented growth, a better economy and a burgeoning country on the move.

The Octopus Grows

As the first years of the new century began an ever expanding network of railroads was continuing to follow westward growth and development. This was especially true of Santa Cruz County.

On March 31, 1901 the Southern Pacific completed the extension of their Salinas line to Los Angeles, and the first through train from the City of Angels to San Francisco, via Watsonville Junction (Pajaro), took place.

Out of Watsonville, Claus Spreckels' narrow gauge Pajaro Valley Railroad had begun. The "PV", as it was affectionately called, was providing mixed service (freight and passenger in one train) to the huge Pacific Coast Steamship facility at Moss Landing to Salinas and the largest sugar plant in the world at Spreckels. Likewise,

the Watsonville Transportation Company had constructed an electric line from downtown out to a new wharf at Port Rogers (later Port Watsonville when Rogers got caught with his fingers in the till). The company even had its own steamship, the F.A. Kilburn. Over in the eastern corner of the county the little community of Chittenden had been established. From there the San Juan Pacific Railway was operating a seven mile line, the Mission Route, to San Juan Bautista. They planned on expanding their line to Salinas, Hollister and Watsonville.

On a much larger scale, Santa Cruz County was looking forward to its second transcontinental connection by 1905. Jay Gould was pushing his Western Pacific from Salt Lake City to Oakland. A branch line was being laid out from the main line at Stockton to Turlock and over Pacheco Pass into Gilroy. At the same time the Ocean Shore had started building down the Coast from San Francisco and up from Santa Cruz. In addition, they had incorporated the Ocean Shore & Eastern to run from Santa Cruz to Watsonville, where it would connect with the San Juan Pacific Railway. It was obvious to everyone that the Western Pacific was going to gain access to the Salinas Valley and San Francisco via Pacheco Pass, the San Juan Pacific Railway and the Ocean Shore.

To attempt to block all this action, the Southern Pacific had incorporated the Coast Line Railway and had even begun construction right next to the Ocean Shore from Santa Cruz to the new cement Plant under construction at Davenport. They started standard gauging the mountain line north from Santa Cruz and south from Los Gatos to further compete with the Ocean Shore. They built the Bayshore Cutoff across San Francisco Bay and the Los Gatos cutoff from South Palo Alto. When all this was completed the Southern Pacific would be able to offer service from San Francisco to Santa Cruz in two hours and forty minutes. That just happened to be the same planned travel time for the Ocean Shore. Because the Santa Cruz area and the mountain route were such popular tourist draws, the famed Sunset Limited and other name trains were to be rerouted via Aptos, Santa Cruz and Los Gatos at Watsonville.

During this period the Southern Pacific also surveyed branches up Soquel Creek Canyon to connect with the hill line at Laurel and from Boulder Creek to Pescadero to connect with their new Coast Line Railway. Based on all the other ongoing local activity, it looked like construction of both was imminent.

Fate and Ma Nature See It Otherwise

April 18, 1906 was to be a page turner for California. That was especially true for local Santa Cruz County railroads. By the time the earth had stopped shaking the future course of local railroading had been changed forever. First, the 6207 ft. summit tunnel on the hill route had collapsed. It would be three years before it would be repaired and the hill route reopened to a new standard gauge service. Second, the majority of the Ocean Shore contractors construction equipment would fall into the sea at Devil's Slide. Also, the fire in San Francisco would financially wipe out the majority of many local backers. The Ocean Shore would never be more than two branch lines. One, which would operate from San Francisco to just south of Half Moon Bay; and the other from Santa Cruz to Swanton, where the San Vicente Lumber Company would build its own nine-mile railroad to log the north coast mountains.

During 1907, just when everything was starting to look up, a small financial panic occurred across the United States. While the rest of the Country was able to recover rather quickly, its effect, coupled with those of the earthquake, brought railroad construction to a standstill in California.

The final blow came in 1908 when one of the worst rainstorms ever recorded hit California. By the time the sun came out, many railroads were looking at unbelievable maintenance costs just to reopen their lines. With the beginning of 1909 there would be no more major railroad construction in California. Most of those that were in process, like the Western Pacific to Gilroy, were cancelled.

The Golden Era for Local Railroads

The period from 1910 to 1920 was a great time for railroads. All the branch lines and private lines were active. The line over the Santa Cruz Mountains had been reopened as a standard gauge and six daily trains made the run to San Francisco via the cutoffs. The track along the coast was upgraded. Even the Ocean Shore saw a margin of success. Although they never completed their line, they did put on a Stanley Steamer bus between the two branches to offer a sort of through service.

As of 1918 there were 18 passenger and six freight trains a day arriving and departing Santa Cruz. Among the many was the popular Scenic Local which operated from San Francisco to Monterey via Los Gatos, Santa Cruz, Aptos and Watsonville. Also, there were the San Francisco and Santa Cruz Limiteds. For a while there were even through trains to and from Sacramento and Bakersfield.

Trains were heavily traveled by high school students among others. Most such students in the northern part of the county went to school in either Santa Cruz or Boulder Creek. As a result, riding the train weekdays to school was the accepted way of travel.

Changes in Technologies, Life Styles and Markets

By 1920, the automobile, bus and truck were beginning to replace the train for many local and not so local trips. More and more government was supporting the new transportation with better and a larger number of roads. Likewise, people found greater convenience in being able to go from origin to destination in the same vehicle. Furthermore, busses offered greater economies when transporting fewer people than could fill a one car train with a crew of four. Finally, larger communities demanded better light delivery of products and goods in shorter times. Thus, truck service quickly replaced the train in the transport of small goods and express. Because the railroads were privately funded, they could not compete on a practical or financial level when motor vehicles via highways were being subsidized by government.

As the 1920's progressed, most of the first growth forested land would be logged off and the lumber industry would wind down to almost nothing. In addition, changes in construction would see freight shipments shift from wood products to sand and gravel.

The arrival of the depression was the beginning of the end for passenger service and some freight lines. By 1930, the Aptos Branch of the Southern Pacific was gone altogether and the Boulder Creek and Davenport branches saw only freight service. Everything that operated out of Watsonville came to an end during the 1920 to 1930 period. This would include the PV line, the San Juan Pacific and the Watsonville Transportation Company. On the North Coast, the Ocean Shore ceased service in 1920. It was taken over by the San Vicente Lumber Company and run for two more years and then it and the company's nine mile logging line was abandoned. One bright spot in an otherwise sour time was the Suntan Special.

In 1927 The Southern Pacific decided to begin a train on Sundays, during the summer, over the hill from San Jose to Santa Cruz, using its unneeded weekday commute coaches. They reasoned that a more relaxed recreation trip through the mountains to places like the Big Trees Grove and the Beach/Boardwalk might do the trick. It was an immediate success. Before long they were running two sections just to handle the ridership. Soon, third and fourth sections were added from Oakland and San Francisco. It was not uncommon for 5,000 people a day to be riding the Suntans.

On February 8th, 1938 the crew at Watsonville Junction hooked up the old combination baggage/coach to Engine 2920 and the last passenger run was made to Santa Cruz via Aptos and Capitola.

In late January of 1940 it began to rain in the Santa Cruz Mountains. By the time it had stopped major portions of the line had been washed out. Because of the competition of the new highway over the hill, a faster bus service, and freight trains being rerouted via Watsonville in 1939, the line was never reopened. Thus, passenger service in Santa Cruz County was over.

Source

Copyright 1996 *Aptos Times*. This article was first published in two segments in the March 1996 and April 1, 1996 issues of the *Aptos Times*. It is reproduced here by generous permission of the publisher of the *Aptos Times* and the author, Rick Hamman.

It is the library's intent to provide accurate information, however, it is not possible for the library to completely verify the accuracy of all information. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the library.