

Building of interurban often sidetracked

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This is the continuing story of the installation of an interurban electrical system between Vacaville, Fairfield and Suisun.

For months after the earthquake of 1906, any progress on a potential interurban electrical system was stalled. Col. James Hartzell still held the major franchise for the San Francisco, Vallejo and Vaca Valley Railway and Steamship Company, backed by British capital. Occasional news updates continued to promise that work on the planned routes would begin soon.

On June 30, 1906, the company explained the delays in *The Reporter* in Vacaville: "Plans have been made to begin construction work on the portion of the line between Vallejo and Benicia shortly after the middle of April, but the fire in San Francisco destroyed the company's office in the Postal Telegraph building, together with the greater part of the maps and plans which had been prepared."

The County Board of Supervisors granted another extension of the franchise until Jan. 7, 1907, to complete the line. At that point "beyond any doubt," cars would run through Vacaville.

Plans grew larger again, fueled by more rumors. "Warm Weather Develops Plenty of Railroad Talk," wrote *The Reporter* on July 7. "The air seems to be full of railroad news. The papers of Northern California have been full of it this week, and it all seems to point to the fact that the San Francisco, Vallejo and Vaca Valley road is but a section of what will in time be another transcontinental system ..."

By September, the San Francisco, Vallejo and Vaca Valley Railway and Steamship Company had at least assembled all its financing and was hoping to get started.

Meanwhile, other companies appeared on the scene with their own ideas for rail systems. The main contender was Melville Dozier, reputed to be the chief engineer for Southern Pacific, owned by Henry Huntington. The company started surveying in September and proposed to run its system into Vacaville along Davis Street and north onto Main Street. From there, one branch would run east on Main to McClellan Street where all the fruit sheds were located. The other branch would run west on Main Street toward the city limits.

The franchise was discussed by town trustees on Oct. 6 and 13. Citizens voiced their concerns about hauling freight through the streets of the town.

In his answer, Dozier stated that "this would not by any means constitute an objectionable feature. Most people in speaking of the transportation of freight had in mind long trains of unsightly box cars. But this method was not followed by electric roads. It was found preferable to install motive power in each car, thus making each one a unit, and the cars used for freight presented by no means an unsightly appearance, resembling the United States mail cars now in common use on both urban and suburban lines, only they were not white. If the freight business grew so that its proportions would render it objectionable, the company would be willing to construct a freight line around the town, both as a matter of accommodation and also to facilitate its passenger service."

No opposition arose among the citizens present, "there seemed to be a general willingness to let Dozier have the franchise, the hope being expressed that this time less talk would be indulged in and some actual work done."

Still somewhat skeptical, Trustee Parker questioned Dozier about what would constitute actual work. "He (Parker) inquired if three or four surveyors passed along the street and driving a few nails would be considered "work." Dozier said that technically speaking it might, but he would agree to have some track laid within that time (the next four months)."

After receiving the franchise, the company incorporated as the Vallejo & Northern Railway Company, or V & N for short in November 1906.

In the following months, Dozier applied for another franchise in Woodland and declared the surveys in Vacaville and Vallejo completed by the end of 1906. Public confidence rose.

But 1907 brought severe problems. By February, a fight raged between the four companies trying to establish their right of way: The Vallejo and Northern, the Napa and Vaca Valley Line, the Hartzell Line, and the Sacramento and Vallejo Line.

Wrote The Reporter on Feb. 2, 1907: "These four electric and steam railroads are said by their promoters to be headed toward Vacaville. Two of them have been under consideration for a year or more, while two have incorporated within a week. Where there is so much smoke, there must be some fire, and the vigorous battles which are being waged for rights of way through Jamison Canyon would seem to indicate that they are in earnest. Much money is being spent ..."

The battle for the right of way continued for the next four years. In the meantime, the V & N tried to uphold its franchises with the least amount of work possible. Such was the case in August 1910, when the franchise was once again set to expire.

On Aug. 5, The Reporter announced "A long-looked-for piece of news reached Vacaville yesterday afternoon when Colonel W. S. Killingsworth, president of the board of town trustees, received a telephone message ... conveying the intelligence that a construction crew would arrive in Vacaville Monday and work would be commenced at once laying track on their property on the east side of Davis street.

"No intimation was given to the amount of work to be done - whether it would be sufficient to hold the franchise ... or whether this move really heralds the beginning of the actual construction of the long-hoped-for electric line between Vallejo and Sacramento. At any rate, there is 'something doing,' and it will be received as good news by everyone."

Once again it was just an effort to uphold the franchise, a single piece of rail laid down on Davis Street. "It is entirely covered over," wrote The Reporter the following week, "and would therefore escape notice of the most observing person - but it serves the purpose."

Not until 1911 did the V & N begin the actual work. In April, the company ordered electric cars from the St. Louis Car Company. Twelve cars had arrived by July, 20 more had been ordered. In addition, "... 45 cars loaded with structural steel for the Northern Electric and Vallejo and Northern Bridge across the Sacramento river (sic) at the foot of M Street have arrived on the Western Pacific from Omaha."

The company broke ground in Woodland in September and completed the tracks there by July 1912. In August, grading work began simultaneously in Suisun and in Vacaville, leading The Reporter on Sept. 20, 1912, to state: "It really begins to look as though the Vallejo and Northern would be running cars into Vacaville sometime before members of the present generation are gathered unto their fathers. With several grading crews at work between here and Suisun, rapid progress is being made and it seems an assured fact that the company really means business."

In October, Northern Electric purchased the V & N line, not unexpectedly, and integrated it into their own track system. Work continued and finally, on May 17, 1914, electric rail service began between Vacaville and Suisun with four scheduled trips daily.

By 1917, Northern Electric went bankrupt and was reorganized as the Sacramento Northern Railroad in 1921.

The idea of using the electric system for freight never materialized. Without a connection to either Sacramento or Vallejo, the short line was mainly used for local passenger services.

Sadly, by the time the line was finally operational, automobiles had become a common transportation medium. Passenger numbers declined and the interurban stopped passenger services in 1926.

Today, the Western Railway Museum owns and operates part of the original tracks and cars of the V & N /Sacramento Northern Electric. Ride these and other historic cars during the Museum's 6th Annual Pumpkin Patch Train Fund-raiser on Saturdays and Sundays, Oct. 11, 12, 18, 19, 25 and 26, from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$10 for adults and \$7 for children and includes unlimited train rides. For more information, call 374-2978 or visit www.wrm.org. The museum is located at 5848 State Highway 12, Suisun.

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