

Fruit-growers, robbers savor trains' arrival

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Second in a series

In 1869, the Vallejo Street Car Co. began operation as a horse-car line going from the business district to the train depot in north Vallejo. It proved to be a poor business venture, as the car had difficulty staying on the tracks.

Yet Vallejo did prosper with the train and by 1870 boasted 17 hotels. It also had a lumberyard and, as a major shipping port, was home to the Starr Mills Flour Co. Unfortunately, in 1871 the train maintenance yards and shops were moved to Sacramento, and along with it a great number of Vallejo residents. Property values plummeted.

After the tracks were laid from Vallejo to Sacramento, a small depot called Vaca Station was established along the line a mile from present-day Elmira. Immediately a general merchandise store and a boardinghouse were built. As rail traffic grew, more people moved to this area.

Soon there was an agenda to move the depot to present-day Elmira. So as to not cause confusion, the station was renamed Elmira when track was being laid from Elmira to Vacaville. The tracks were completed in 1869 and the train that traveled this route was called Vaca Valley Railroad.

It wasn't until the 1880s that Frank Buck became one of the first growers to risk shipping fruit back East. With no refrigeration, the fruit traveled on ventilated cars. Still, growers were hesitant, and it wasn't until the 1890s that shipping fruit back East really took off. Once they were committed, the rates rose, with the growers paying almost double what was being charged from Sacramento. The growers continually fought the railroads on this issue.

In 1889, the refrigerator car was first used to carry fresh fruit to market. Though it has been reported that Frank Buck was the first to send fruit by refrigerated car, another account is that the experiment was made by A.T. Hatch and Frank McKevitt, who shipped a carload of fruit from Suisun.

In time, there were plans to expand the Vaca Valley Railroad to Clear Lake, and the line

was renamed the Vaca Valley & Clear Lake Railroad. Track was laid in spurts and eventually reached as far as Capay. It was never extended further. The Vaca Valley & Clear Lake line was taken over in later years by Southern Pacific, and it built a depot at Vacaville in 1907. SP discontinued Vacaville service in 1934.

As early as 1853, Benicia's Robert Semple had petitioned for the Benicia-Marysville Railroad. Bypassed in 1868, it wasn't until a decade later, 1878, that Benicia would realize rail transportation, when tracks were laid on the infamous sinking stretch of track.

A ferry, the Solano, was launched in 1879 to carry the trains across the Carquinez Straits between Benicia and Port Costa. The largest ferry in the world at the time it was 424 feet long by 116 feet wide and could carry two locomotives with 24 passenger cars or two locomotives with 36 freight cars. It was called one of the "Wonders of the World," an incredible sight when docked at Benicia.

One disaster was reported on the Solano. In 1896, three freight sections were loaded on. The trainman threw the wrong switch and a switch engine started moving, pushing the freight engine over the end of the ferry. It was eventually hauled out, and survived.

In 1914, the ferry Contra Costa went into service and was even bigger than the Solano at a length of 433 feet. It lasted until 1930, when the ferries were abandoned as the first train crossed the Martinez-Benicia Bridge.

In 1905, the Vallejo, Benicia & Napa Railroad was built, but never reached Benicia. It operated between Vallejo, Napa and Calistoga. After an unstable history, it discontinued passenger service in 1937.

In the early days, trains made unscheduled stops for passengers who waved them down. In 1894, near Davisville, two men stopped the Overland Express passenger train waving a lantern. Two holdup men with guns ordered the engineer to knock on the express car.

The messenger in the express car turned off his lantern and said nothing. But when the bandits threatened to use dynamite and/or shoot the engineer, the door was slid open. The thieves gathered up four Wells Fargo bags with \$50,000 in gold and silver coins.

Unhooking the engine, the bandits forced the engineer to take them to the town of Washington in Yolo County. Here they disembarked with their booty. With the train engine out of sight, they buried the bags and rode off on two horses they had previously tied there.

Hidden in the darkness watching was a rail tramp and boozier, John Harmans. When the robbers left, he filled his pockets and bedroll with all the coins he could carry and then reburied the bags in another location. He then hopped the next freight.

Harmans moved to San Francisco and lived in style for the next few years socializing, going to the racetrack and having a number of girlfriends. Then he got drunk one day and told his tale to a companion at the race track. The companion turned him in, hoping for a reward.

Caught, Harmans took the agents to the burial location at the hobo camp, but was unable to pinpoint the exact spot where he had buried the money. He served a few years jail time and then returned to life on the rails.

In 1912, there was a holdup on the Southern Pacific in Solano County on the China-Japan Mail passenger train. At Benicia in the dark of night, two holdup men crawled on the tender, the car attached to the rear of the locomotive that carried fuel and water.

At the Goodyear Station, just outside of town, the pair made their move and collected the valuable mail sacks. Cutting the cars from the engine, they drove the engine through the marshland. They jumped off the running train at Cordelia Slough, where they were to meet up with a boat.

The train roared on through Solano County, passing the stations on the route at 60 miles per hour. The small Tolenas Station was alerted by telegraph and the station man threw a switch so that the engine would go off the main line. There the train smashed into a parked freight train. A few months later the thieves were caught.

Electric trains started service in Solano County in 1913. The Sacramento Northern started laying tracks between Vacaville and Willotta in Suisun Valley in 1912. By 1930, nine miles of track had been laid from Creed to join up with the Vacaville Junction for freight service only. It was renamed the Vacaville-Willotta Branch.

For Vacaville-Suisun travel, there were four round trips daily for passengers with an 11 p.m. special on Saturday nights.

But the electric train was a little late. In 1912, the highway between San Francisco and Sacramento was completed, and slowly but surely the automobile took over. The interurbans could not compete. The line between Vacaville and Willotta shut down in 1926.

Service on the Oakland, Antioch & Eastern started in 1913, bringing in a line of

interurban electric trains to compete with SP on the Oakland-Sacramento run. The trains were boarded on a ferry on the Contra Costa shore and unloaded at Chipps Island in Solano County. Bridges were erected over Spoonbill Creek and Montezuma Slough to accommodate the trains. The tracks were laid in a straight line to Sacramento, passing Maine Prairie.

These interurbans could travel up to 80 miles an hour. Though they made flag stops along the way, they were not particularly interested in Solano County business. Rather, these were high-speed trains advertised as the fastest travel on the Oakland-Sacramento run. These big green trains catered to the passenger and offered parlor observation cars and dining cars.

For three years, starting in 1914, passengers from Dixon traveled to Dozier to connect with the main line. This Dixon Branch of the OA&E, 11.5 miles long, was organized by farmers needing a quicker way of getting their products to market. However, passenger service from Dixon was unsuccessful and the line was abandoned. Historically, this line has the distinction of operating for the shortest span of time.

In 1940, OA&E discontinued passenger, but continued to move freight. It was a mode of travel long remembered by sportsmen. In the summer, this line, which became the Sacramento-Northern line, was well-traveled by countless fishermen rode the big green electric trains to prime fishing areas such as Spoonbill and in the fall and winter months the duck hunters came in droves.

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