



# *The Ferroequinologist*



Los Gatos Branch Special

Central Coast Chapter, NRHS

Santa Clara, California

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## *Memories of SP's Los Gatos Branch*



This special issue is a consolidation of articles on Southern Pacific's Los Gatos Branch that have appeared over the last several years in *The Ferroequinologist*.

Despite having been abandoned Jan. 23, 1959, just two years after the end of steam on SP's commutes, interest in the line's history remains strong. Thanks to Central Coast Railway Club Charter Member Charles Givens and others, a superb collection of photos of the scenic branch remains.

**Above:** Train #132, the 5:50 p.m. commute from San Francisco, arrives in Los Gatos around 1953. (Charles Givens collection)

**Right:** Around the same time, P-7 4-6-2 No. 2477 brings #132 into Los Gatos. By then weekday service was provided by a single train in each direction, with #129 being the morning train. Little over a decade earlier, service extended over the mountains to Santa Cruz. (Charles Givens photo).





**Above:** The local freight pulls into the Los Gatos yard behind C-9 Consolidation No. 2558 in 1955. For a time in 1953, the P-6s and P-7s swapped jobs. But all were out of a job a few years later with the end of steam. P-6 No. 2453 was scrapped Nov. 2, 1955 at Bayshore. The 2476 and 2477 were sold for scrap July 14, 1959 at Los Angeles. These two engines comprised the entire P-7 class, originally being Arizona Eastern 701 and 702. Consolidation No. 2558 was sold for scrap July 17, 1959 at Los Angeles. **Below:** SP P-7 Pacific No. 2476 leads Saturday-only train #166 near Royce Street in Los Gatos around 1951. For a time it ran as #166 instead of #168. (Charles Givens photos)





**Above:** In a view of the depot's street side taken in 1953, a once-common Railway Express Agency truck has pulled up to the express office located at the south end of the depot, across from the freight house. **Below:** Looking south across Main Street in 1953 at the Los Gatos depot, freight house and yard. The REA office in the depot remained open until 1961. The depot was finally torn down circa 1964. (Southern Pacific photos)









**Left:** Two views of Vasona Junction circa 1953 looking south toward Los Gatos. The track on the right is the south leg of the wye from the Los Altos Branch. The wood shanty is a telephone booth and train register, and survives today near Glenwood. If you look closely you'll notice the signal at milepost 53.2 is a semaphore, while the signal next to the junction switch is a target style. Automatic block signaling originally extended from Vasona Junction to Santa Cruz. **Right top:** In May 1955 a tender truck has derailed at Farley Road in Los Gatos, which was a gravel street then.

**Right bottom:** P-6 No. 2453 with Saturday-only train #168 heading for Los Gatos at Pollard Road on the Los Altos Branch in 1953. Photographer Givens lived three blocks from here for 29 years. (Charles Givens photos)



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**Top:** Southern Pacific's Sept. 25, 1955 Coast Division timetable listed four weekday trains over the 8.9-mile branch, although two of the trains were equipment moves between San Jose and Los Gatos. Trains to and from San Francisco were pulled by the locomotive facing forward. For equipment moves between San Jose and Los Gatos, engines had to back up the branch. (Courtesy of Don Douglas) **Above:** P-6 No. 2453 with train #168 has just arrived with its Saturday passengers from San Francisco in March 1953. **Opposite top:** The locomotive is then uncoupled and run around the train on the siding. **Opposite bottom:** After coupling to the rear car, No. 2453 will run tender-first through Los Gatos, Vasona Junction and Campbell on the run to San Jose as equipment train #185. Note the difference in tenders; the P-7s have the cylindrical Vanderbilt tender, while the P-6 has a rectangular tender. (Charles Givens photos)





# Excursion on the Branch



On April 25, 1954, the Northern California Railroad Club ran a *Blossom Special* circle excursion from San Francisco to Niles, then down to Los Gatos and back to San Francisco via the Los Altos Branch. Power for the trip was P-7 Pacific No. 2476. On the rear of the train was Central Coast's open-platform observation car No. 2901, *The Ferroequinologist*.

**Above:** The excursion train at Williams Street in Los Gatos.

**Below:** The special has just crossed Main Street on its way back to Vasona Junction. While the Bank of America building, just visible on the extreme left in the photo, is still there today, hardly a trace is left of the SP. **Opposite:** The special heading north toward Vasona Junction. The tracks at the far right in the top photo may be the Standard Oil spur. (Charles Givens photos)











**Above:** P-7 class Pacific No. 2476 at the Los Gatos depot while powering the Northern California Railroad Club's *Blossom Special* excursion April 25, 1954. **Below:** On April 25, 1953, the last Saturday train to Los Gatos arrives at the depot with P-7 No. 2477 with train #168. (Charles Givens photos)





# Last Train to Los Gatos



By Jack Gibson

The word was out that Southern Pacific was abandoning the Los Gatos Branch in early 1959, and we thought maybe a last trip should be run. Central Coast contacted the Los Gatos Chamber of Commerce for support in case we couldn't meet the minimum cost, but the decision was made to go ahead anyway with a round trip between Los Gatos and San Jose on Sunday, Jan. 25, 1959. Regular service on the branch was ending Friday, Jan. 23.

With only a couple of weeks for planning, we were fortunate to be working with the town's newspaper to promote the event. We pushed it hard, set a ticket price, printed tickets and started selling.

At first, not too much interest. We ran an article about the first train into Los Gatos on the narrow-gauge, and how this would be the last train to leave town. Business picked up, then in the last few days ballooned. The size of the train was limited by the runaround at the depot. So a diesel(!) and about six commute cars (maybe seven at the most) was the limit.

Sales were booming by the day of the event. Central Coast Excursion Chairman Neil Vodden sold the remaining tickets at the Los Gatos depot just before the special arrived. Finally the last train arrived and began boarding for the 1:30 p.m. departure. The train was powered by "torpedo boat" GP9 5624 (the future 3006/3195; retired and scrapped in 1993) still in black widow paint.

The high school band showed up and started playing, while Neil was still busy raking in the

money in the depot.

Then it was time to leave. We told the band members to leave their instruments locked in the depot and to climb on board. Neil told those in the depot that hadn't yet been able to buy a ticket to get on board anyway. The cars were so crowded, there wasn't even room to stand in the aisles. (Even members of the chamber of commerce showed up for the last trip.)

Before we left the depot, SP officials called San Jose to have three more cars added to the train for the return trip. There were an estimated 1,300 people on the last train to Los Gatos.

After arriving, retired SP engineer Bill Jones, who starting working out of Los Gatos when it was still a narrow-gauge line, pulled the first spike signalling the end of the Los Gatos Branch. He handed it to an official who handed it back to Bill Jones, and then took it to have it engraved for Bill.

That's the short of the story. Yes, Central Coast cleaned up on that trip. And the Chamber later admitted how sorry they were that they didn't take part in the historic event!

The next morning one of the crossing wigwags was still running from passage of the last train. The day after that SP maintenance-of-way crews were there starting to remove the rail. The right-of-way through town shortly be-

came a lengthy parking lot!

Although passenger service continued on the northern section of the branch from San Jose to Vasona Junction until Jan. 27, 1964, the 1959 excursion was the last chance to ride the 2.5-mile line into downtown Los Gatos that opened in 1877 as the narrow-gauge South Pacific Coast.

(An article on this event appeared in the February 1959 *Ferroequinologist*.)

**Above:** On Sunday, Jan. 25, 1959 the Central Coast excursion train arrives in Los Gatos behind GP9 5624. (Ed Graham photo) **Below:** A souvenir ticket from the event. (Courtesy of Mike Olenczuk)



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# Sixty Years Mark the Passing of SP's Mountain Line

By Jon Porter

June 4, 2000 marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abandonment of Southern Pacific's line over the Santa Cruz Mountains between Los Gatos, a small community in the foothills south of San Jose, and Olympia, 8.8 miles north of Santa Cruz. Officially, the line was the Los Altos-Santa Cruz Branch on the San Francisco Subdivision of the Coast Division.

The route had been completed in May of 1880 by the South Pacific Coast Railroad as part of its narrow-gauge line between Alameda and Santa Cruz. SPC was taken over by SP in 1887 and the line was standard-gauged around 1907. By the late 1930s the line was down to one through freight a day in each direction. Passenger service, though by now losing \$30,000 a year, was still provided between San Francisco and Santa Cruz by trains 31, 32, 33, 34 and 47.

On the afternoon of February 26, 1940 the line was closed by mud slides and wash-outs following several days of turbulent storms. Train #34, the 11:26 a.m. arrival from San Francisco, likely had the dubious distinction of being the last train to run over the "hill," ending 60 years of operations. Train #33, the evening train to San Francisco, ran via Watsonville Junction that night. Regular Santa Cruz passenger service ended after that.

SP initially planned to reopen the line, and

even had the route listed in the March 30, 1940 timetable. However, facing an estimated \$55,000 in repairs, coupled with competition from newly-opened Highway 17, SP threw in the towel and filed for abandonment of the 16-mile section between Los Gatos and Olympia.

Once permission was granted on June 4, the rails were pulled up, with much of the right-of-way being taken over by the water district. Lexington Dam was built in 1952, displacing the former townsites of Alma and Lyndon with a two-mile-long reservoir. Highway 17 was rerouted around downtown Los Gatos in 1956, severing the route SP had taken from the station down into Los Gatos Canyon. In 1958 the line was further cut back with the abandonment of the 2.5 mile section between downtown Los Gatos and Vasona Junction.

In 1982 SP halted service between Eblis siding in north Santa Cruz and Olympia, but left the 7.7 miles of track in place. Even so, when tourist operator Santa Cruz, Big Trees and Pacific took over the line just three years later they encountered fallen trees across the tracks, sections buried by mud slides, shifts in track alignment (the line crosses the San Andreas Fault between Wright's and Laurel), erosion of the right-of-way that left track and ties dangling in the air, and pools of water from clogged drainage pipes. Basically the

same maintenance headaches railroaders have faced since the mountain line opened a century earlier.

Despite all this, 60 years later parts of the abandoned line remain remarkably intact. Tunnel portals, crossties, trestle supports, signal bases and other relics are visible along the overgrown right-of-way. The route along Los Gatos Creek is now part of a hiking and bike path as far as the reservoir. Trestle supports near Lyndon and Aldercroft are still in place, but today carry large water pipes instead of rails. The towering concrete bridge piers at Wright's (or Wright, as it was listed in SP timetables in later years), stand abandoned amid dense forest growth but still display, in faded paint, their admonition not to stand too close as "...rocks etc. might fall from passing trains."

Much of the mystique of the mountain line involves the tunnels on the route -- nearly three miles of bores were required over the 24-mile distance between Los Gatos and Santa Cruz. The longest tunnels, the 6,157 foot summit tunnel at Wright's and the 5,793 foot tunnel between Laurel and Glenwood, have especially become part of the legend and lore that has always surrounded the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Though the line passed into history in 1940, its ghost offers the enticing prospect of relieving traffic congestion on Highway 17, while haunt-







ing Santa Cruz residents with the fear of their town being overrun by tourists and commuters. Embraced by transportation planners in Santa Clara County and held at arm's length by their counterparts in Santa Cruz, studies and proposals to re-open the line have appeared on a regular basis for the past 30 years.

A 1971 study by Lockheed determined that 37 percent of the original route was still in use, 27 percent could be easily restored and 36 percent would require new construction, principally around Lexington Reservoir and Los Gatos. The cost was estimated at \$50 million.

Most proposals have advocated the use of light-rail electric trains. One of the latest plans proposed an \$8.20 toll on Highway 17 to fund the estimated \$500 to \$600 million it would cost to reopen the line as a transit corridor. Santa Cruz officials vetoed revival proposals in 1977, 1982 and 1991 and have indicated a reluctance to participate in new studies.

One proposal that seems to be gaining momentum is the restoration of passenger service via Watsonville Junction, the route the Suntan Special used after the mountain line was severed. The Suntan covered the 70 miles between San Jose and Santa Cruz in two hours, just 24 minutes longer than trains took over the mountain line. Transit times would be close to the old running time over the mountain if the Watsonville-Santa Cruz line could be upgraded to allow 35-40 mph speeds. This route is attractive since Monterey is clamoring for passenger service, and could possibly pool equipment with a San Jose-Watsonville Junction-Santa Cruz operation.

#### Sources:

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San Francisco Chronicle, April 9, 1993

Santa Cruz Sentinel, October 29, 1971



**Opposite left:** Another signal base is under a water pipe along the former right-of-way that's now a trail to Lexington Reservoir. From this point the tracks went straight, past where the man is standing, and crossed Los Gatos Creek.

Today that trestle carries a water pipe across the creek.

**Opposite right:** A signal battery box dated 1927 is still in place above Los Gatos Creek at Aldercroft. **Left:** Also at Aldercroft is another trestle which now carries a water pipe instead of trains. Decades of decay have left the structure too weak to support locomotives anymore.

**Above:** The most prominent remaining landmark of the abandoned line is the summit tunnel portal and retaining wall at Wrights, pictured here showing the effects of 46 years of nature's reclamation efforts on Feb. 7, 1986. (Jon Porter photos)







**Opposite top:** In 1953 the branch still ran down to Los Gatos Creek, and Highway 17 began and ended at Santa Cruz Avenue, pictured on the right in the photo. Three years later the Highway 17 by-pass around Los Gatos severed the right-of-way just beyond the siding switch in the photo. (Southern Pacific photo) **Opposite bottom:** A hike down the same area on Valentine's Day 2005 found a cement base that once supported the signal guarding the south entrance to Los Gatos yard. It's reinforced by a pair of

rails that probably date to narrow-gauge days. A little farther south, marking the area where Highway 17 severed the branch, is six feet of track, left for reasons unknown when the branch was scrapped. **Above:** Tracks still crossed Grays Lane in downtown Los Gatos on Mar. 8, 1986. Three decades after abandonment, the old right-of-way was still largely dirt parking lots. **Below left:** Although the tracks in Los Gatos were removed in 1959, the switch at Vasona Junction and a short section of track remained for years

afterward to service a packing shed. On Sept. 11, 1971 the branch still looked intact, with the former Los Altos (now Vasona) Branch curving off to the left in the photo. Parallel Winchester Boulevard was still a two-lane road lined with orchards. **Below right:** A decade later the tracks into Los Gatos were starting to disappear. By the time the *Permanente Local* passed on Oct. 25, 1984, the junction switch had been removed and the spur was no longer in alignment. (Jon Porter photos)







**Top:** In 1953 a Southern Pacific photographer snapped this view of the Los Gatos yard looking north toward the freight house and depot. **Bottom:** Also in 1953, Charles Givens took this photo of SP C-8 class 2-8-0 No. 2725 at the south end of the yard. Today the depot and yard area is occupied by Town Plaza Park and a post office building.



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