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RAILROADS of CALAVERAS

SAN JOAQUIN AND SIERRA NEVADA RAILROAD

By D. C. Demarest

Author of **A Bit of Mother Lode History**

In the early 1880's, a plan was on foot that, had it been successfully carried out, might have made very great changes in the history of Altaville and Angels Camp. James B. Sperry, the owner of the Calaveras Big Trees, had dreamed of landing tourists on the ground of these great natural wonders in a comfortable railroad car instead of transporting them in rough-riding stage coaches over 50 miles of dusty roads. While the season of the stage coaches, and of Sperry's resort, was only about five months long each year, a rail entry, as Sperry proposed, would have made the Big Trees both a summer and winter resort. Then too Sperry had in mind the fact that his extensive timber interests would become valuable, with an all-rail outlet to general markets.

Sperry succeeded in interesting a Sacramento capitalist and promoter, F. Birdsall in his railroad project, and on March 28, 1882, Articles of Incorporation of the San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Railroad Company were filed at Sacramento. Surveys and construction of a narrow-gauge rail line were begun that same year, between Woodbridge and Lodi. This line was completed to Valley Springs in 1885. Unfortunately at this juncture, Birdsall's death occurred. His widow sold her controlling interest to the Southern Pacific Company, who went no farther with the construction than to broad-gauge the road to Valley Springs in 1908.

The extension of this railroad from Valley Springs to the

Kentucky House was made by the Southern Pacific in the recent times, and was built for the sole purpose of serving the Calaveras Cement Company.

I remember well that during the promotion of this railroad, Sperry was a very busy man, assisting Birdsall in the sale of the Company's stock. Through Sperry's efforts, all of the prominent people then in Calaveras County became stockholders in the Company. I believe that Sperry himself invested a considerable sum in the enterprise, along with his brothers who were the owners of the Sperry Flour Company in Stockton.

My father's Stock Certificate was burned up in the Berkeley fire of 1923 that destroyed our home in that city. Mat Manuel of Murphys remembers putting away for safe keeping, his father's (John Manuel's) Stock Certificate. At last report, he was still unable to locate it.

There is no question but that Birdsall's death was a real calamity for Calaveras County. Had he lived to complete the railroad to the Big Trees, which looked at the time like a certainty, a great lumber industry would have been developed in Calaveras County, such as was established in Tuolumne County through the building of the Sierra Railway in the late 1890's. And this is by no means the whole benefit that would have accrued to the Calaveras communities from such completion.

MILTON

"Memories of the Mother Lode"

Just before World War Two, I had occasion to visit Milton, once the gateway for travel and transportation to and from

our section of the Mother Lode country. Over 30 years had gone by since I had last seen the place. In earlier years when Milton had close relationship with Altaville and Angels Camp, it was a thriving transfer point between wagon roads and steel rails, through which I frequently passed. I believe that as a small boy I was one of the first persons to take passage on its new railroad that begun service on May 1, 1871.

On this recent visit, I found that the town as my memories pictured it, had vanished. A few families were living on the higher ground that once was the outskirts of the town. The railroad had gone into history, with termination of its service on June 1, 1940. The present system of highways has no trunk line within miles of old-time Milton. The Post Office even has been discontinued.

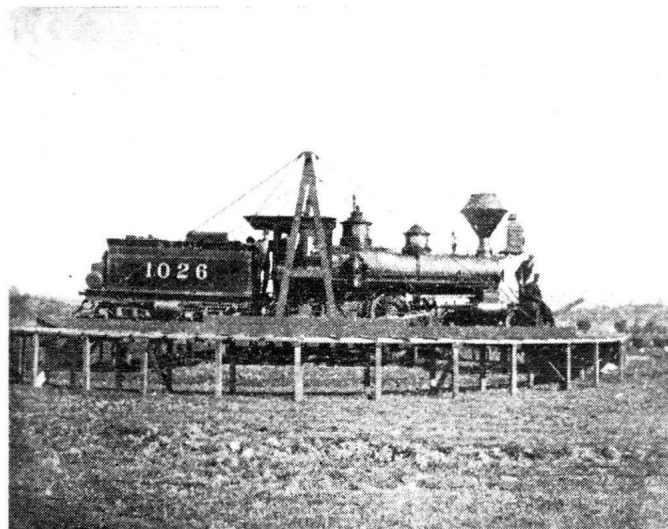
Milton was not located in the Mother Lode country. It lay near the western border of the Sierra foothills, on the rolling plains of eastern San Joaquin Valley. Its nearest Mother Lode ground was about five miles away, at Jenny Lind, where placer and hydraulic mining had been carried on in earlier times, and extensive dredging had been done in comparatively recent times.

The location of Milton was not intentional with the builders of the railroad. When this rail project was conceived, a great copper mining boom was on in the Copperopolis area. The Stockton and Copperopolis Railroad was organized to construct the rail line from Stockton to Copperopolis. When its construction had reached a point within sight of the foothills, where grading for the road-bed would be an expensive undertaking, the copper boom was on the decline. So construction work was suspended and the terminus of the rail line thus created, was named Milton. For ten years previous to this event the copper mines in the vicinity of Copperopolis and Telegraph City — the principal ones of which were the Union Mine, the Napoleon Mine and the Quail Hill Mine — had been shipping high-grade complex ores containing copper, gold, silver, lead and zinc. Before the rails were laid to Milton, these ores were hauled by ox teams to Stockton, from where they were conveyed on river barges to be reshipped from San Francisco on ocean steamers bound for the British smelters at Swansea, England.

During its best days Milton had a railroad schedule each day except Sunday, of a freight train in the forenoon and a passenger train in the afternoon. All of the incoming and outgoing freight was transferred to and from the freight teams by resident forwarding agents, one of whom, Louis Beysser, served our iron works for over 30 years. Two stage lines from the Mother Lode country made connections with the passenger trains. Our Angels Camp stages carried passengers, mail and express matter to and from towns and points along their route as far into the mountains as Murphys. When the winter snows had gone, this service was extended beyond Murphys to the Calaveras Big Trees. A second stage line served Copperopolis, Tuttle town and Sonora — and the Yosemite Valley, when the mountain roads were open for travel. There was a time when private railroad cars were to be seen quite frequently on the Milton sidings, while their passengers were making trips by stage or private conveyance to the Calaveras Big Trees and the Yosemite Valley.

Gold bullion from our mines was transferred here from Wells Fargo Co.'s "strong boxes" in the stage coaches to the

safes in the railway express cars, and reverse transfers were made of the returning gold coins for the Mother Lode pay rolls and current settlements. Through the period of heaviest shipments of gold bars from the Utica and other Angels Camp mines, the Wells Fargo agent at Milton was Alex Brown, an old time friend of mine, who had come to Milton in the early 1880's and had established a general merchandise business in conjunction with his Wells Fargo agency. In the early 1890's he served our country as Assemblyman in the State Legislature, for several terms. After 1900 when he left Milton, Alex Brown was chairman of the State Board of Equalization for some 12 or 16 years.



1884—Narrow gauge engine on turntable in Valley Springs.

FADING GHOSTS -- OLD RAILROADS

By Elizabeth Kaler

There is always something fascinating about a train when one is young.

My first idea of a train was that there was always a Milton train.

I do know that my father with his four horse team would go to Milton to get his winter order of groceries being shipped from Stockton on the Milton train.

Then my next remembrance of the Milton train was when my eldest sister would be preparing to take an early stage ride from Murphys to catch the Milton train. When I say an early stage ride, it might make you shudder, as it was at two o'clock in the morning.

The Matteson Stage Company would send one of its helpers, known as "Portegee Joe," with a lantern in his hand, to go from door to door to waken the passengers who were to go that morning. I know he would come to our house but it wasn't necessary as our folks would be already up. Then at two o'clock the stage would drive up to the door to collect its passengers.

And now began that long weird ride, stopping at Elkhorn Station or Pool's Station to change horses; then galloping on down to Salt Spring Valley, again stopping to change horses and on again to catch the Milton train.

It always seemed a mystery why the train had to leave

in Stockton and it also had a line from Peters to Oakdale.

In May 1888 the company was associated, amalgamated and consolidated with the Southern Pacific Railroad Company and it operated its trains into Milton until discontinued.

Milton was a very busy place for a number of years after the line was built. Freight for most of Calaveras and Tuolumne counties was shipped to that station. Copperopolis shipped great quantities of copper ore from Milton. Great teams hauled freight to the various towns of the Mother Lode. Stages with passengers and mail made daily trips to and from Milton. Travel to the Big Trees and Yosemite Valley was routed through Milton, and private cars from the East remained at Milton while their owners visited the great natural resources of Calaveras and adjoining counties.

With the coming of the railroad into Valley Springs and Angels Camp and the increased travel by automobile, the train service into Milton began to decline until only a mixed train service once a day was operated. This schedule was maintained until the agent was removed in 1933. Train service was continued intermittently until 1940 when it was completely stopped and the tracks removed.

The following named persons served in the capacity of railroad agents at Milton: Blanchard, Egan, Glasford, Burton, Dake, Humphrey, Miles, Hemphill, Sowerby and Carey. Mr. Beysser was forwarding agent for the company from the time freight first began moving until his death in 1852.

THE OLD SIERRA RAILROAD

By ELIZABETH KALER

As we think of various incidents of the past, our minds revert to that little old phenomenon, the Sierra Railway.

People don't make fun of railways do they? You would naturally say "Of course not," but wait and see.

I don't remember when this priceless treasure came to Angels; I had not seen it, when one day in Angels, Mike Arendt said "Oh, you should go out to see our new train. It's unique, it's more wonderful than the train that goes up Mt. Tamalpais."

It was some time later that I really saw it, as we still patronized the old stagecoach to Milton when making journeys to Stockton.

But at last it was my great pleasure to board the little old train.

It wasn't so very funny, but it was so little and the engine was so little. To me it seemed to act so funny, running around on all different tracks it could find until at last captured and coupled to its train. Then away we would go, quite briskly for a few minutes, until we would come to the switch back. That slowed us down.

One thing on the switch backs they had to watch out for cows on the track. Some one always stood out on the back platform and rang a bell to chase them off. Very often a passenger had that honor. We seemed to lose a lot of time on the switch backs but they were necessary. A little boy who came to visit his grandmother, said, when she remarked that the train was late, "No wonder, Grandma, they made so many mistakes, they always had to go back." One place on the Tuolumne switch back it seemed as if we would back right into Alec McQuig's cabin but we never did.

Crossing the river was a great event and I always liked to know when we were crossing but if it were a very dark

night one could hardly tell. Once I asked the conductor, "Are we on this side of the river or the other." He said, "On the other." As I thought over his answer, I became a little confused.

One winter's night as the train was making its way across the trestle, creeping oh, so slowly, very quietly it stopped, leaving us stranded above the water. The word reported was; The engine had gone off the track. It was no easy matter for the poor train men to get it back, while we sat holding our breaths with that fast flowing river beneath us. But again we were safe on the little old Sierra.

It may not seem so funny but this train could stop any place, at any time for any reason whatsoever. Some times it was to make a few repairs, or to deliver a message, return a borrowed tool or to fight a fire their engine had started. The stopping wasn't so bad but I dreaded their starting up because it would give such a jerk that, if you did not hold on, you might be thrown out of your seat.

One afternoon there were several passengers, one a young lady sitting across the aisle. As usual the train stopped and immediately she stood up to look out, of course, wanting to know the reason for the stopping. She was holding to the back of her seat when suddenly the train started with a most frantic lurch, the seat turned and she was thrown to the floor. A man rushed to pick her up and fortunately she wasn't hurt.

There are many little happenings one could tell but surely we would not forget our train crew, such good conscientious men; when this little train would get off the track, all jumped willingly to help. It made no difference how he was dressed.

One day, when we were coming over, the conductor and brakeman were having a little conversation while standing in the baggage car. Without more preliminaries, the conductor took off his coat and vest, handed the vest to the brakeman who put it on and the conductor put his coat back on, so the two now looked quite official. Whether this took place so often, I don't know but it showed the comradeship between them.

They were thoughtful, too One dark cold winter morning the brakeman had started a fire in the stove which stood in a corner of the coach. He admonished me to watch the fire and if it didn't burn well, turn this damper this way and fix a certain opening another way and then if I didn't get warm, call him, he would be out helping the engineer. Then the conductor came in and lighted the big swinging lamp which glowed so dimly and as he was going out, said, "It is a little dark in here but I hope you can see."

And so on through the years the little old Sierra Railway worked its way in and out of Angels until its days of labor were over, no more to come prancing in at night, with its little whistle tooting.

Oh, you little railway of the yesterdays,
We keep your memory clear;
Though we often smiled at your oddities,
Yet in our hearts we hold you dear.

EDITOR'S NOTES

The Calaveras County Historical Society takes pride in the honors bestowed upon a member of the Society, Dr. Rockwell

OFFICERS OF CALAVERAS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Editor of Bulletin, Coke WoodMurphys

Dr. Hunt, who was appointed recently as "Mr. California" for 1954 by Governor Knight. This was later confirmed by the State Senate at a meeting which was addressed by Dr. Hunt.

We wish to congratulate Dr. Hunt on the very successful California History Foundation Institute which was held recently at the College of Pacific. The program was of especial interest to local historical societies and was well attended by 150 representatives coming from Del Norte to San Diego. Plans were completed for a conference of local historical societies at Columbia in July.

We urge all members to fill out the biographical data forms for members as well as those for the old timers. Mrs. Sadie Hunt will supply these forms.

We hope all members will obtain a copy of the **Matteson Diary** and sell additional numbers. This is our first special publication and we hope it will be followed by more. Contact Sadie Hunt.

Don't forget to invite people to join the society. We should have 500 members. Our programs on transportation have been excellent and many people would be sorry to miss them if they knew how interesting the papers are.

THE SIERRA RAILROAD

By Archie Stevenot

In January, 1897, the Sierra Railroad was incorporated and the road was started from Oakdale. The first train into Jamestown was November 8, 1897. The event was celebrated on November 10, 1897. Officers of the Sierra Railroad were Pee A. Ponistowski, Pres.; T. S. Bullock, Gen. Mgr., Jamestown; W. C. Potts, Supt., Jamestown; S. D. Freshman, Vice Pres. & Treasurer, Jamestown; B. T. Booze, Gen. Frt. & Pass. Agt., Jamestown; R. M. Peck, Auditor, Jamestown.

In 1900 the Sierra Railway Company of California extended its railroad from Jamestown, Tuolumne County, to Angels Camp, Calaveras County, a distance of about 21 miles of winding, crooked road with switch backs. It passed through Tuttle town, Melones or Robinson Ferry, Stevenot's Station, ½ mile south of Carson Hill, Carson Hill then called Irvine

for a short time, to Angels Camp. A stage line connected Angels Camp with Jamestown at this time and Al Swerer was stage driver for many years.

W. H. Newell was the chief engineer and with a party of surveyors, started to secure the rights of way and to lay out the line. People were so glad to have a railroad, they just about gave them the land for rights of way through their ranches and mines in Calaveras County. My father, Emile K. Stevenot, gave them the right of way through our old homestead and all he asked was that a flag station be established so he could flag the train when he went to San Francisco. This they granted him.

On July 24, 1899, the Sierra Railroad entered into a contract with the West Coast Construction of New Jersey, to construct this piece of railroad. It was to be a standard gauge railroad from Jamestown to Angels Camp, with all the necessary side tracks and switches. The rails were to be of steel, not less than 40 pounds to the yard.

The Stanislaus River was bridged a short distance above Melones or Robinson Ferry. Switch backs were installed on both sides of the river to reduce grade. A depot was built on the Tryon property a short distance east of Angels Camp and passenger and freight service was inaugurated between Jamestown and Angels. A special type a Heisler engine was required on the line on account of the grades.

Daily passenger trains were run between the towns. The first train arrived in Angels Camp, September 10, 1902.

Discontinuance of service was granted by the Railroad Commission of the State of California on March 1, 1939 and the tracks were taken up.

During the construction of the Sierra Railroad, Angels branch, I lived on our old homestead below Carson Hill and worked in the mines. A great deal of the construction on the railroad was done by churn drills, blasting, handwork and Fresno scrapers with teams of horses. At one time I remember there were about 300 men between Melones or Robinson Ferry and Angels Camp. They were known as the Jerries and they had a large camp at Carson Hill.

An accident on the Sierra Railway Company of California occurred on June 26, 1906 at Gee Whiz point on the Calaveras side of the Stanislaus River at an elevation of 1,000 feet. Alfred E. Roberts, a civil engineer, purchased a ticket at Tuolumne for Angels. At Jamestown he boarded another train of the Sierra Railway Co. This was in the forenoon. He was told by a bartender in Jamestown that a regular passenger train did not leave until late in the afternoon but that a special train was being made up. He went to the Supt., a Mr. Blanton, and stated that he was anxious to get to Angels. The train consisted of five cars beside the engine, first an oil car, second a flat car loaded with a traction engine, third a flat car on which there was a couple of cords of sawmill slabs, fourth a box car loaded with dynamite and fifth a flat car on which Roberts and two other men sat. Roberts rode in the position designated by the conductor, Hawkins. Both of the men on the car with Roberts were killed in the accident. The jury rendered a verdict for Roberts in the sum of \$5760. As stated above, I arrived at the scene and passed the engine mentioned, oil tank car, a flat car, another flat car, all on the track and then found a great hole under the track where the box car with 15 tons of powder had been.

I approached the brakeman, who was in a kind of dazed condition and asked him what had happened. He said the

powder car jumped the track, tipped over and on its way over, while partly on the track, exploded. He said when he saw the powder car jump the track, he jumped off the flat car and got behind it. This gave him protection but the concussion blew his pants off.

Mr. Bullock and Mr. Freshman arrived on the scene and told the crew not to talk.

Someone said there was a fourth man killed but Jim Oneto of Carson Hill and I went to look the hillside over. We spent two days doing this, and the only thing we found was small pieces of skull with a small amount of hair on it. The powder boxes and all wood parts of the car were in small pieces like tooth picks.

The second serious accident occurred on the railroad on June 25, 1904. There was a collision between a passenger train and work train and Mrs. Marie Valente and Mrs. Paulina (Rivara) DeMartini were killed. Gus Swanson was the engineer on the Angels run and Waldo Bernhard was his fireman. Waldo lives in Angels at the present time. He married Victoria Weirich.

Gus Swanson was a bachelor at the time and he would wash his clothes and then hang them out to dry near the cab. When passing over the Stanislaus River the wash on the line would be flying in the breeze. Gus is now retired from the Sierra Railway Co. and working for Pickering Lumber Co. on the railroad.

Joe Azevedo's father was in charge of the tracks for many years.

SAN JOAQUIN and SIERRA NEVADA RAILROAD

By Mrs. Ida Wimer

This is the name of the Company that constructed the railroad into Valley Springs, Calaveras County.

The Company was incorporated on the 21st day of March, 1882, by F. Birdsall, Horace Bentley, Thomas Mc Connell, S. Washburn, Jacob Brack, B. F. Langford and C. Birdsall, for the purpose of constructing and operating a narrow gauge railroad from a point in San Joaquin County on the Mokelumne River known as Brack's Landing, to the Big Trees in Calaveras County, a distance of about 70 miles. The company was capitalized for one million dollars and divided into ten thousand shares of the par value of \$100 per share.

Work was begun on the western end of the road in the spring of 1882 and by July 4th of that year the road had been completed to the edge of Lockeford. Work was continued and the road completed to a point about a mile east of Clements (formerly called Midway). At this place construction work was delayed for one year. As the work progressed,

stations were established at various places along the way and from these stations freight was distributed.

The contract for grading to Wallace was awarded to Mills and Northcroft and Jesse Crossland was the construction contractor for the road. Mr. I. Wallace was the engineer who located the line and the town of Wallace in Calaveras County was named in his honor.

The contract for grading from Wallace to Valley Springs was let to Capt. H. A. Messenger of Valley Springs. He had considerable difficulty with the work. The road was eventually constructed to Valley Springs, reaching that place in April 1885 after passing through Woodbridge, Lodi, Lockeford, Clements, Wallace and Burson (Helisma).

The company owned three engines. One called the "Ernest Birdsall" was a small construction engine and was named for the son of one of the builders. The other engines were called "The B. F. Langford" and "The Jacob Brack." The round house and repair shops were located at Woodbridge.

Sam Hilliard and "Sandy" Carlton were engineers and Amos McClellan was the conductor while Ed Thomas served the capacity of brakeman on the road.

Wood was used as fuel on the road for many years.

The road did not prove a financial success for its owners and the stock was eventually bought up by the Crocker, Stanford, Huntington and Hopkins interests and on May 4, 1888, the road was consolidated with the Northern Railway Company and Lodi was made its western terminus. Later it became part of the Southern Pacific and was changed into a broad gauge road in 1908.

The company operated a mixed passenger and freight train daily for years. Later the passenger service was discontinued and the company now operates freight trains only.

Valley Springs was the end of the road for many years. In 1926 when the Calaveras Cement Company built its plant at the Kentucky House near San Andreas, Southern Pacific was asked to extend the railroad to the plant. After carefully studying the expected amount of freight, the railroad would only agree to build the road to North Branch on the Calaveras River, a distance of eight miles. The cement company agreed to lay a standard gauge line the remaining five miles to the plant. This was done and the first load of cement was shipped from the plant in June, 1926. By 1929 the Southern Pacific railroad officials were convinced that the cement plant was to be successful and agreed to purchase the five miles of company owned track for the actual cost to the cement company, which was \$255,000. This section of the road was never used for passenger service.

The Calaveras Cement Company and the lumber companies furnish most of the freight which is carried by the railroad. When the Penn Mine at Campo Seco was operating it shipped great quantities of freight over the road.