



THE TOURIST TRAIN TO NOWHERE

by Bonnie Miller

From ore cars to passenger and freight trains, Calaveras County has had its share of railroads. We even have a community named Rail Road Flat although it never saw a railroad. Today all of those trains and their tracks have faded into oblivion.

Calaveras County by nature is considered a “termination point” in terms of transportation. The county has reasons for either originating traffic, or as a destination point for traffic, but not as a through route. Geographically we are too far south to have provided the best route for the great Transcontinental Railroad, which crosses the Sierra alongside present-day Highway 80. Yet in the early days of the county ore, lumber and later cement were shipped by rail away from the county. The railroads also provided efficient transportation of people wishing to travel to or from the valley and other points further west.

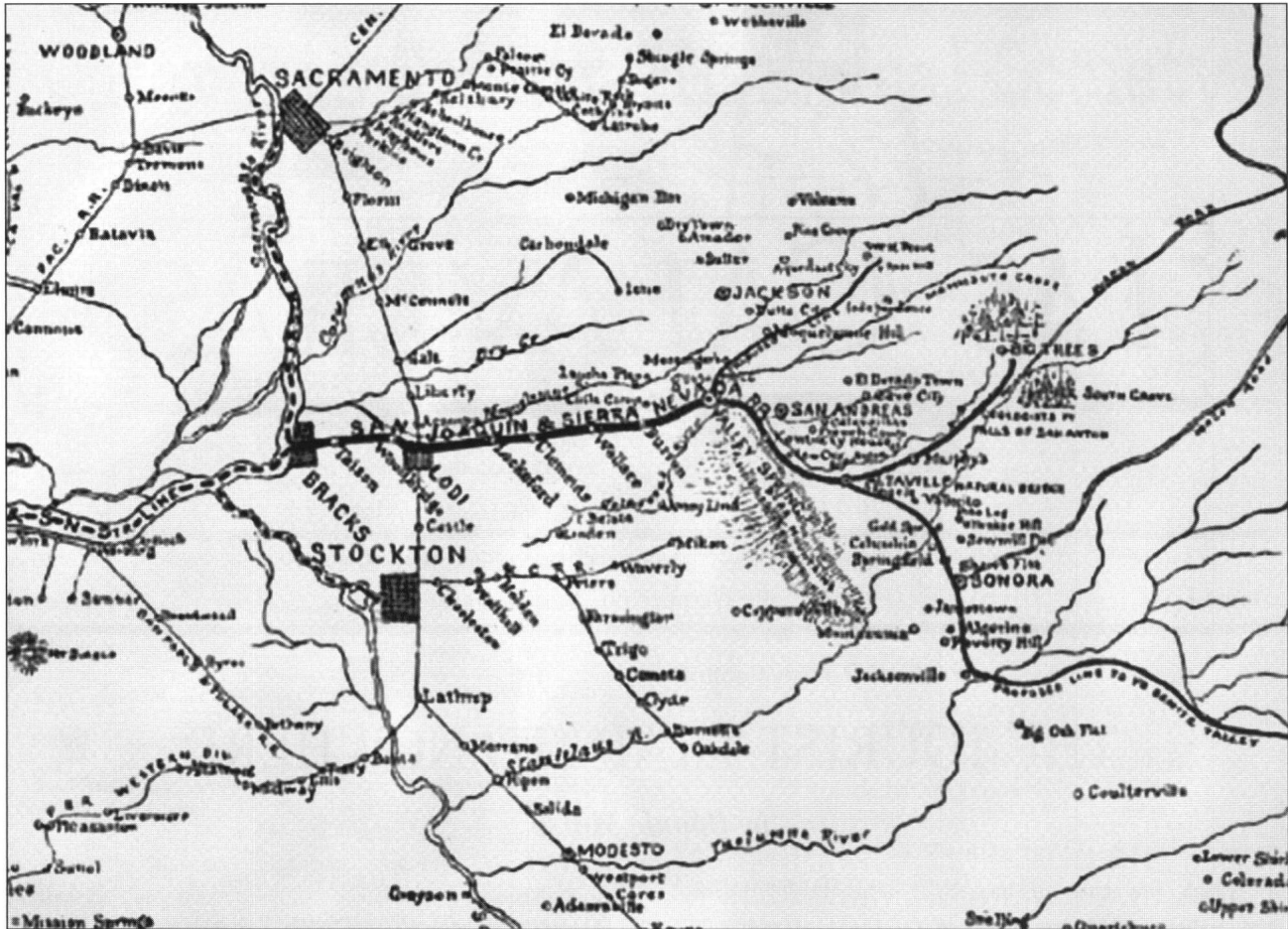
Today Calaveras County and the foothills continue to harbor numerous reasons for people to either return home or visit the area. What happened to all of the trains that could have been? At one time there were three railroads that served the county.

The Stockton and Copperopolis Railroad

The first railroad constructed in Calaveras County was intended to reach Copperopolis but it never did. On 21 July 1861 the Central Pacific Railroad was incorporated, serving much of California. Eighteen months later, on 3 December



This photo believed to be of the excursion train, the “Calaveras Special,” as it steamed up the hill by Toyon. Photo dated 3/21/1956, although the excursion took place one month later. Donated by Wally Motloch.



Portion of the 1884 map of the San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada RR showing its rail and water connections. This map shows the line to Valley Springs, with future lines to the Big Trees, Sonora and Yosemite that were never built. *Courtesy Bancroft Library.*

1862, Articles of Association were drawn for the Stockton and Copperopolis Rail Road for the purpose of connecting the community of Copperopolis with Stockton and points in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.

Copper was in high demand, and Copperopolis was the principal supplier in the United States. The new railroad company received a subsidy from the federal government to assist in construction of the rail line which began in February of 1871. The grading of the roadbed was only moderate until construction reached an eastern terminus named Milton. It was named in honor of the engineer who laid out the road.

On the fourth of July the first passenger train arrived at the Milton terminus. Since there was no town there at the time, the welcoming celebration was held one mile east of the future

town at the Rock Creek Grove. More than 2000 people attended the festivities, riding in on the trains from Stockton that ran hourly. It was only the fourth train line to operate in the young state of California.

Freight for most of Calaveras and Tuolumne counties was then shipped via this line through Milton. Shortly after the line reached the Milton area, the price of copper began to



Wagons await the train at the Valley Springs Depot, circa 1885. *Historical Society photograph.*

decline. Further construction of the line into the hills to the east was abandoned. Passengers wishing to visit the Big Trees were transferred to a stage for the remainder of the trip. Both passenger and private cars brought tourists who had traveled far and wished to see the wonders of the Big Trees.

In May of 1888 the line was assumed into the Southern Pacific Rail Road Company.

In just a few short years, train service had also reached Valley Springs and Angels. With the additional advent of the automobile, service to and from Milton declined to just a daily trip. In 1933 the position of Agent was eliminated in Milton. Intermittent service continued until 1940 when it was cancelled all together. The tracks to Milton were removed.

San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Railroad

By the early 1880s narrow gauge fever had hit the west coast. While the Big Four were gobbling up the railroad business and fixing high prices across the west, rebellion was afoot in the fertile agricultural land of California's inner valleys. At the Port of Stockton, a wheat tax was levied on wheat shipments through the port. Farmers were tired of the exorbitant freight charges for moving their product by rail to the ships. Authorities in San Joaquin County decided to fight back. They figured that if a narrow gauge rail line were constructed, it would be within their control and not likely to be gobbled up by the railroad octopus. The attitude was reflected in a rebellious folk song of the day, printed in the *Valley Review* in January of 1882:

*"Come one and all,
both great and small.
In union there is strength,
By working altogether,
we'll overcome at length.
And we will show today boys,
The powers with whom we wage,
That we have grit and pluck enough,
To build the narrow gauge."*

From this sentiment was born the San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Railroad. It was incorporated on 28 March 1882 by seven partners who formed the initial company. One of the partners who funded the company was Jacob Brack, a San Joaquin County pioneer and farmer. He purchased delta land east of Woodbridge. He dredged the land, constructed a steamer landing, and it became the western terminus for the rail line. Product could be shipped to his landing and loaded on to ships to go to San Francisco without having to go through Stockton. Regarding the little railroad, Brack vowed "no monopoly shall ever get hold of it."

The line would serve two purposes. First, it could transport ore and agricultural goods to shipping points in the delta and

What is gauge?

Rail gauge is measured as the distance between the insides of two rails. The standard gauge is 56-1/2" wide, as determined by the British engineer who designed the gauge. The standard gauge accounts for more than half of the world's rail lines. Anything wider is called a broad gauge. Broad gauge is used where substantial loads need to be accommodated, such as where cranes operate at loading docks transporting extreme loads. Anything narrower than standard is called a narrow gauge and is typically 36" wide. A monorail, by comparison, is theoretically only a single rail. Monorails are strong single rails that the car is attached to. The single rail both guides and supports the cars, coupled with an exterior power source.

Sometimes a rail roadway will have three or four rails. These rails are used for transfers to new directions or changes in gauge. Whatever the gauge, the rails can only support up to a maximum load, so gauges are rated for strength as well. Details of the various gauges may vary in other countries but the concept is the same.

bypass the big railroad and port. Secondly, the train could bring passengers from the delta to the gold communities.

Much of the expertise for the project came from Frederick Birdsall of Nevada. Birdsall had a successful quartz mine there which used a narrow gauge rail line. He brought both his narrow gauge experience and financing to California. Birdsall heavily promoted the new narrow gauge railroad around Stockton and Lodi, claiming it would take passengers from the valley floor all the way east to the Big Trees. With a new rail road, he claimed that people could more readily reach the Big Trees, which lay seventy miles further to the east. It was thought that the line might even one day provide a connection to the silver mines of Bodie.

The Big Trees in Calaveras were a huge tourist attraction in California. Birdsall quickly befriended Calaveras County businessman James Sperry. Sperry owned several business interests around Murphys and Ebbett's Pass. His most noteworthy enterprise was the grand hotel at the Big Trees. Sperry took an early interest in the railroad project, busily selling the stock to prominent Calaveras County residents.

Another Calaveras County businessman, Daniel Burson, also speculated heavily that the rail line would reach the Big Trees, and he wished to capitalize on the idea. He purchased land in the west county hoping that a roundhouse could be built in that area. He also purchased land around the San Antone Falls on the theory that tourists who visited the Big Trees would

also wish to see the nearby falls. Birdsall worked with these Calaveras businessmen and others to secure rights-of way, sometimes for as little as just one dollar.

On July 8, 1882, the first portion of the line was completed. It was celebrated with an excursion train enjoying the westernmost end of the line. The new narrow gauge had an immediate impact on the central valley. In response to the competition, the Central Pacific Rail Road dropped shipping prices, but it was too little too late. The new San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Rail Road was steaming ahead toward Valley Springs.

Construction to Wallace was accomplished readily enough, while construction between Wallace and Valley Springs proved more difficult in the hills. Eventually the line did reach Valley Springs. In fact it arrived in Valley Springs before the depot was built and the first customers used a canvas tent. No one minded, as soon enough the line and depots were completed and regular service was available.

The turntable was constructed in Valley Springs thereby dashing Burson's dream of selling property to the project. Burson also never realized any tourist traffic via the planned extension of the train as he had hoped. Within a few years he was heavily mortgaged and destitute. In 1888 he and his wife moved to the San Antone Falls. The train was never extended, and the falls never developed into the tourist draw as he had speculated. Burson passed away in 1907 and his widow retained the land, also hoping to realize his dream. But tourist traffic to the falls never materialized and she passed away three years after her husband.

In 1885 Frederick Birdsall had suddenly passed away. It has always been speculated that Birdsall's untimely death derailed the plans to extend the train to the Big Trees. Without his connection to Calaveras County, further interest in extending the route dropped off. Had the line been extended, it would have opened the way for developing a thriving lumber industry up the

Ebbett's Pass Highway, much as the Sierra Railway in the 1890s provided such a boost for Tuolumne County. In fact, Birdsall had been involved in a nasty, expensive divorce. By the time of his death he had long divested himself financially from the railroad. Whether the loss of his financial support or his death caused the decline in interest in extending the line, it is unknown.

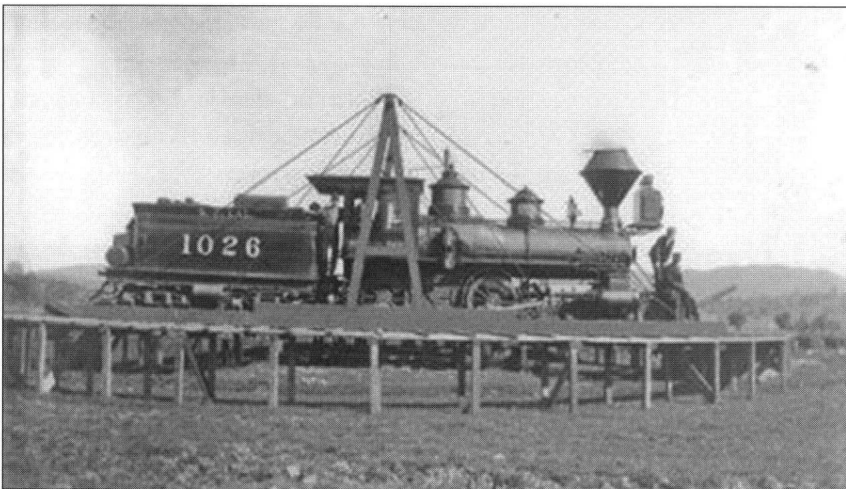
The little railroad steamed on in the foothills with its wood-fueled steam engines. There were four narrow gauge steam engines that primarily served the line. Most were built by the Baldwin Locomotive Works. Engine No. 1 was named the Ernie Birdsall for the son of the founder. It had been built in 1881 and worked for one year in Nevada before it came to California. Engine No. 2 was named B F Langford for another of the company's owners. No. 3 was named for Jacob Brack. The fourth engine on the line was numbered as 1026. Later a fifth engine was the 1027. The star of the line was the pretty little passenger car named Ettie. She was named for the wife of one of the company presidents.

Despite its early success the new railroad was never a major financial success. Only two thirds of the \$400,000 construction cost had been raised through the sale of stock. The remaining capital had been raised with bonds, and the railroad was having trouble paying the interest on those bonds. With the withdrawal of Birdsall's support, in 1886 the young company started facing financial problems. Contrary to Brack's wishes a majority of the company stock was sold to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. On 15 March 1888 the San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada was consolidated into the SP's subsidiary, the Northern Railway Company. The following year the Northern Railway abandoned the track between Woodbridge and Brack's Landing, while it converted the central portion of the line to standard gauge. Then one year later the Northern Railway was consolidated into the Southern Pacific.

The SP must have expected the line to run for many years because in 1908 the remaining rails to Valley Springs were upgraded to standard gauge rail, ending its unique status as a narrow gauge railroad. The SJ&SNR provided passenger and freight service daily until bus service and automobiles became more prevalent in later years.

The Sierra Railroad

Before the end of the century it became evident that yet more rail service was needed to serve the mining communities. On the first of February, 1897 the Sierra Railroad was incorporated, again with the intent of connecting the valley with



The SJ&SN engine was rotated on a turntable in Valley Springs for the return trip, circa 1885. Historical Society photograph.

the foothills, but this time more to the south. The new line would connect Oakdale to Jamestown in Tuolumne County.

In 1900 the line was extended twenty-one miles to the north, from Jamestown to Angels Camp. Fifty-four years later Archie Stevenot, "Mr Mother Lode", recalled the enthusiasm with which Angels residents looked forward to the new 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."

Construction of the Angels line was difficult in that the terrain required the train to struggle with difficult elevation changes and steep grades. A system of four switch-back spurs, trestles and bridges were required to carry the little train over the nineteen difficult miles of track. A special Heisler engine was required to navigate the steep grades.

The first train to arrive in Angels was on 10 September 1902. The new Angels Camp branch then regularly brought daily freight and passenger service to the southern communities and gold mines in Calaveras County. The quirky little passenger cars required the interiors to be lit by lantern. Passengers themselves were often required to keep a small wood stove going for warmth in the winter months. While the train had to negotiate the windy grades and trestles, it often had to stop for cows on the tracks or to conduct repairs. Despite its peculiarities passengers loved the little train. In 1954 Elizabeth Kaler of Angels Camp penned the following rhyme:

*"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."*

Daily service to and from Angels Camp operated until 1932. On the first of March, 1939 all service on this spur was discontinued. Shortly thereafter the tracks to Angels were removed. Later, the remaining portion of the Sierra Railroad became the set for many movies, earning it the name the "movie train." Eventually the remaining train line and turntable in Jamestown became the Railtown 1897 museum complex and California State Park.

The San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Railroad's later years

Meanwhile, the SJ&SN train that served Valley Springs gained new life. In 1902 SP briefly studied the feasibility of constructing the additional thirty miles of rail to the Big Trees. They chose not to. Although passenger service had been



This excursion train carried passengers on a tour of the new Quarry No. 1 at the Calaveras Cement Company's dedication ceremony, 9 May 1926.
Historical Society photograph.

dropped, the line continued to provide freight service three times a week. Calaveras County had emerged as a major source of cement, supplying the world with its famous mineral product. To ship out the heavy loads, between 1925 and 1926 SP extended the branch line twelve miles further east into the foothills to a new ending point known as the Kentucky House. The Kentucky House had originally been a stage stop and trading post but had been absorbed into the property now owned by the Calaveras Cement Company.

The Cement Company paid \$255,000 toward the construction of the new extension. A dedication with ceremonies and a barbecue was held in honor of the new track on the 9th of May 1926. It is said that 15,000 people attended the festivities, roughly two-and-a-half times the total population of the county.

The first load of cement was shipped on the new line in June of 1926. This spur immediately proved profitable for both the Cement Plant and the railroad. Construction of the new Pardee Dam, the highest dam in the world at the time, was completed in 1929 and also provided a boost to the tiny railroad. The last four miles of the branch at Kentucky House were sold to the Cement Company on 28 April 1929. The line continued to transport lumber, cement and ore for years. SP timetables listed it as the Kentucky House Branch, and operated three freight trains per week. The train ran between the Kentucky House and Lodi where cars interchanged with the SP mainline that ran from Stockton to Sacramento.

The Excursion Train

In April of 1956, the movie *Rebel Without a Cause* was playing at the Calaveras Theater in San Andreas. On Sunday



Crews built a five mile rail spur to the Pardee Dam construction site in 1928, confirming the importance of the Kentucky House line. *Historical Society photograph.*

the 22nd one thousand people gathered at the high school gymnasium for the Calaveras Music Festival. Across town the Calaveras Special was chugging in to the Cement Plant.

On the morning of 22 April, 1956, the Southern Pacific ran a one-time excursion train from San Francisco to San Andreas. The event was purely social, provided primarily for employees, friends and guests of SP. The adventure began and ended in San Francisco, providing only small opportunity for involvement on the other end. The train left the Ferry Building in San Francisco at 7:20am and proceeded to Sacramento. There it changed engines then traveled south down the valley to Lodi where it stopped to pick up further passengers. If there was room on board, an adult could board the train with a round-trip ticket back to Lodi costing \$3.20. After dropping those passengers off, the train would return to San Francisco that evening via Stockton and Tracy, making a full circle.

The morning train turned east from Lodi and continued past Lockeford and Clements. It stopped briefly in Valley Springs where an informal ceremony took place. Calaveras County Historical Society president Judge J A Smith gave a brief history of the railroad. The final destination was the Kentucky House where Wm Wallace Mein, the president of the Cement Company took passengers on a tour of the plant. One account of the excursion train event claims that it was held to celebrate the construction

of the new No. 5 kiln. The following week the Cement Company announced quarterly dividends of twenty-five cents per share.

The excursion train, called the "Calaveras Special," was a joint effort sponsored by the Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce, the Historical Society, the Cement Company, and the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society. The event was said to have commemorated the 75th anniversary of the San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Railroad. It was in fact the 74th anniversary, but 75 must have sounded better.

The excursion train was a great success, according to those that rode it that day. Was it the portent of greater things to come?

Possibly the resumption of passenger service, maybe a permanent tourist attraction? Regrettably no, the SP excursion train was a onetime affair, aimed primarily at those in the higher echelons of the company, with no regard for the folks at the destination point, in fact the reason for the line in the first place. It was the last time a train carried passengers to Calaveras County.

Two years earlier Elizabeth Kaler predicted the demise of rail service to Calaveras County. She speculated, "*Doesn't it seem strange that Calaveras County has lost all its passenger trains? Does it mean we are deteriorating or progressing. I wonder.*" Although freight service to the Kentucky House continued for thirty more years, other than the one excursion



The excursion train brought hundreds of tourists from San Francisco and Lodi to visit the Cement Plant in 1956. *Photo courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of West Calaveras History.*

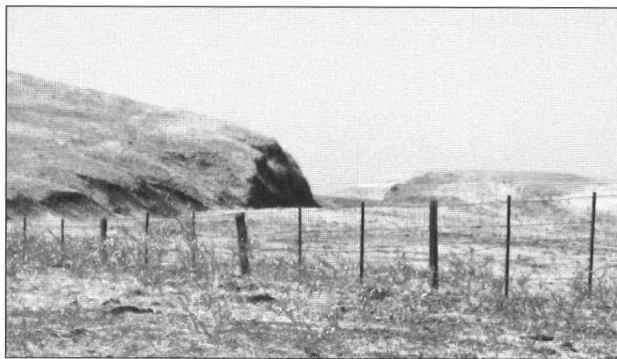
train, the tiny spur track never carried passenger service again.

The Calaveras Cement Company closed the plant at Kentucky House in 1984. After the plant closed, the railroad branch was used intermittently to store freight cars on the empty rails. In about 1998 the tracks were removed by a salvage company. The right-of-way for the railroad bed was offered to Calaveras County. The county declined the offer.

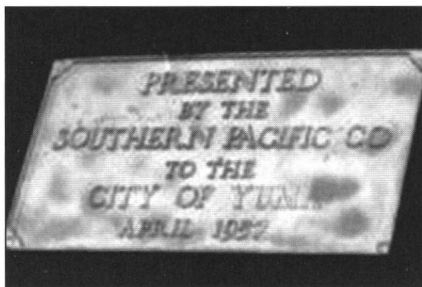
One hundred years after construction

In 1986 a growing movement began crawling along the former railways of the country. The conservancy named Rails-to-Trails started bringing new life to former rail roads. The organization's objective is to create a nationwide network of trails, constructed on former railroad beds. Since the bulk of the construction has already been done, it takes only minimal work to convert these gentle rolling roadbeds to pleasant trails for hiking and biking. The Kentucky House line seemed ideal for this purpose.

Many California trains have gained new life as tourist attractions. One of the most famous re-invented trains operating in California is the Skunk Train of Mendocino County, which began tourist operations in 1987. Two years later the Napa Valley Wine Train began service as a wine tourism attraction. Closer to home, the Sierra Railroad, mother of the Angels spur line, is a state park and robust tourist destination and operates several excursion trains throughout the year. Further south the narrow gauge Yosemite-Sugar Pine Rail Road was rebuilt. Originally a transport for timber, when the company went out of business they took up the tracks. Thirty years later enterprising developers rebuilt the tracks and operate the train today as a popular tourist destination. To the north, the Amador County Historical Society has purchased a half-interest in the former Ione and Eastern Railroad. Now renamed the Amador Central



All that is left of the train that served Milton is this cut in the hillside. Photo by Bonnie Miller, September 2012.



One of the SJ&SNR's engines resides today in the city of Yuma, Arizona, bearing this plaque. Photo by Gary Close, 2012, courtesy Rurik Kallis.

Railroad Corridor, the new owners hope to re-open this line for tourist use in the future. There are numerous bustling museums across the state dedicated to trains. The year 2012 has been a busy year for these museums as it is the 150th anniversary of Union Pacific Railroad.

In 1940 the Stockton and Copperopolis Railroad that went to Milton was discontinued and the tracks taken up and the roadway itself absorbed back into the landscape. That same year the Sierra Railroad

discontinued service to Angels when that line was abandoned and those rails were also removed. That roadway was absorbed into the surrounding ranches or inundated under water. But the line that served Valley Springs and the Kentucky House remained viable for another fifty years beyond the life of the other lines that had served Calaveras County. What happened to the little train with the big dreams?

Fortunately some of the beautiful little rail cars from the SJ&SN narrow gauge line did go on to enjoy new lives. Several years ago Rurik Kallis, who later became a resident of San Andreas, found an interesting narrow gauge passenger car in the Owens Valley desert. It was from the SJ&SNRR. He was curious what a car from the San Joaquin Valley was doing in the desert. Apparently in the 1930s SP transferred all narrow gauge cars east to work in the Owens Valley. The life of the Carson & Colorado Railroad is another story in itself.

All of the narrow gauge cars were assumed into the Northern Railway and later SP. Engine No.2, the B F Langford was scrapped in 1906. The standard gauge engine that pulled the 1956 excursion train today resides in the city of Yuma, Arizona on display, a gift from SP. Possibly another is working today in Alaska. The little narrow gauge has been thoroughly disbanded and Calaveras County chose to decline the offer of the roadbed right-of-way.

The organization Rails-to-Trails wishes to ensure "... a better future made possible by trails and the connections they inspire." The Kentucky House branch traverses some of the most scenic land in the county alongside the Calaveras River. But when the opportunity to convert the old roadbed and right-of-way to public use arose, it was forsaken. Adjacent residents did not want to see hikers or bicyclists traveling alongside their property lines. The dream of a passenger train bringing tourists to the Big Trees was never realized. There would be no hiking trail, no bicycle path, and no tourist train to anywhere in Calaveras County.

Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

July – September 2012

New Members

James Poore—Modesto—Lifetime Membership
Richard Stone—Valley Springs
Larry Hadley—Belvedere, California
Jim Mc Elroy—Murphys
Rob & Diane Churchill—Sacramento
Jerry & Betty Howard—Mountain Ranch
Duane & Melisa Gyde—Volcano
Bill & Sue Wilmer—Mountain Ranch
Buddy Link—West Point

Donations

The Historical Society appreciates the following generous donations:

Phil Alberts—Joe W. Zwinge for Sheriff Election Card, dated August, 1930

Mary & Pam Taylor—cash donation in memory of Jack Lodato

Richard Stockton—Early map of California

Donna Shannon—chair for Historical Society office

Mary Alice Sanguinetti—copy of genealogy for B. Canepa, copies of legal documents for Luigi Malaspina, John Arata, and Bacigalupi families, photos of unidentified people (believed to be from Calaveras County)

Dean White—Antique 8-day mantle clock

Jan Cook—Documents pertaining to the appeal of a murder conviction of George W. Cox, the last man hanged at the Downtown Courthouse, as well as genealogical family records

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