

Native Son

Why a railroad from S.F. to Santa Cruz failed. One reason: The tracks fell into the ocean

Photo of Carl Nolte

Carl Nolte

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Comments

Ocean Shore Railway Car 1409 is under restoration in Pacifica, thanks to history buffs who have raised \$150,000 with bakes sales and such, as well as Pacifica Jack cheese.

A model of the Ocean Shore Railway railroad is on display at the Pacifica Coastside Museum.

What remained of historic Car 1409 was found rotting away in a Sebastopol backyard.

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Carl Nolte/The Chronicle

Here's an idea to remember: Never underestimate the power of memory.

Today's example is a determined group of people in Pacifica on the foggy San Mateo County coast who are keeping alive the memory of the Ocean Shore Railway Co. railroad, which ran from San Francisco down the cliffs and across the oceanside valleys heading south toward Santa Cruz. The railroad never made it that far — it was the classic train to nowhere. It went broke after only 15 years. The last train ran 101 years ago.

Even its most fervent admirers have never seen an Ocean Shore train, but the story of the little railroad somehow represents the spirit of the coastside towns. The railroad was imaginative and scenic, and had a certain against-the-odds flair.

“The Ocean Shore was a dream, a beautiful dream,” said Deidra Crow, who has lived on the coast since she was a little girl and is one of the prime movers of a project to restore passenger Car 1409 and put it on display just off state Highway 1 in Pacifica’s Sharp Park district.

“To put it out there so people can come to our town and see how it was, well, that is our dream,” said Maxime Elizabeth Hines, a photographer, videographer and confessed cheerleader for the project.

“It’s a tangible part of our history,” Crow said. “The intangible part is someone will be able to sit in the passenger seat and imagine how it was riding that train.”

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It’s hard to imagine that ride now, and even harder to imagine what the original investors saw in a cliff-hugging railroad down the thinly populated coast. The original idea was to build a double track electric-powered line from San Francisco to Santa Cruz — sort of a turn-of-the-century BART operation.

It never worked out. The great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 knocked out the railroad before it really got started. The plans were scaled back, and when the Ocean Shore opened it was a conventional railroad with ordinary steam engines. Six new passenger cars were ordered from the Holman Car Co. in San Francisco. One of them was Car 1409.

The company advertised heavily. “Reaches the Beaches” was the main slogan. Developers pitched low-cost housing — \$250 for a lot on Salada Beach, \$10 down, \$3 a month. Cheap rail fares for commuters — only \$5 for a monthly pass.

They also talked about turning the foggy coast into a summer resort and advertised Rockaway Beach as “the Playground of San Francisco.” It didn’t work.

Worse yet, the railroad was built on the unstable cliffs that line the coast including the infamous Devil's Slide where Montara Mountain meets the Pacific. It was tough keeping the line open. The tracks kept falling into the ocean.

It was only half a railroad anyway: The north end from San Francisco to just past Half Moon Bay never connected with the south end heading up from Santa Cruz. There was a 26-mile gap. After the summer of 1920, it was only a memory.

"But it brought development to the coastsides," Crow said. Eventually, all the little villages became towns. Out of it grew Pacifica, nine small communities incorporated as a city as recently as 1957.

Now Pacifica has a population of just over 33,000, "an enchanted and magical place," Crow said. "And a city of volunteers."

One of the historical society's volunteer-led projects was to restore the town's first church, built in 1910, right alongside the Ocean Shore tracks. Over the years, it had been everything from a place of worship to a social center, a school and a movie theater and finally a ruin. It was restored as the Pacifica Coastsides Museum and community center with exhibits ranging from the Ohlone days to the present.

One display features a working model of the Ocean Shore in its heyday, with miniature trains chuffing through little towns and around Devil's Slide.

Which brings us to the latest project, restoring Car 1409. In 2004, 84 years after the railroad gave up the ghost, rail historians discovered Car 1409 rotting away in a backyard in the Sonoma County town of Sebastopol. To railroad admirers such as John Schmale, it was a "tarnished jewel," an "aged starlet" and a "super candidate for restoration." Kathleen Manning, the historical society president, and her friends got the car and got to work.

Now it's covered by a tarp near the Vallemar Station restaurant, itself a former Ocean Shore depot. The old car is a work in progress, the toil

performed by volunteers and master carpenter Scott Lindner. The work is slow and careful. "We're halfway there," Lindner says.

The money, about \$150,000 so far, has been raised by bake sales, rummage sales, tea parties, tours of the local castle, everything imaginable, even historical cheese.

Manning discovered that the famous buttery Monterey Jack cheese was actually invented by a coastside resident named Stefano Mori. Mori's Point is named for Mori, but the cheese is named for Monterey. A dishonest employee stole the recipe and sold it to a "scoundrel" from Monterey named David Jacks. So Manning and the local historians found the original recipe, hired a professional cheesemaker, and Pacifica Jack was reborn. All profits go to the Ocean Shore project. They have sold nearly 3 tons so far. Their motto: "If you don't know Pacifica you don't know Jack."

Carl Nolte's column runs Sundays.

Email: cnolte@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @CarlNoltesf

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Carl Nolte is a fourth-generation San Franciscan and has been with the San Francisco Chronicle since 1961. He is currently a general assignment reporter and writes a column called Native Son on Sundays. He covers San Francisco and the West and has been an editor and war correspondent.

Carl is the recipient of the Maritime Heritage Award, 2010, San Francisco Maritime National Park Association; the President's Medal, California Maritime Academy, 2011; President's Medal for public service, University of San Francisco, 2000; Lifetime Achievement Award, Society of Professional Journalists, 1986, and various other awards.

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