

OCEAN SHORE RAILROAD LIVES ON

“Volunteers are restoring the last passenger car of the Ocean Shore Railroad that a century ago ran from San Francisco along the San Mateo County coast, boasting in its advertising that it ‘reaches the beaches.’

‘Much of the exterior has been restored and care is being taken to keep as close to the original as possible,’ said Kathleen Manning of the Pacifica Historical Society, adding that with enough funding the car should be open for public viewing in two years.

The car, numbered 1409, ran over rails from San Francisco along the San Mateo County coast with stops that included Daly City, Pacifica, Montara, Moss Beach, Princeton, El Granada and Half Moon Bay. Two stations, the Vallemar Station on Highway 1 and the Tobin Station on Pedro Point, still stand but serve other functions.

The passenger car was built by the Holman Company of San Francisco in 1913 and saw extensive use on the Ocean Shore until the railroad went out of business in 1920.

‘Some 80 years later, it was found rotting away in a Sebastopol orchard,’ Manning said. The historical society took a look, decided the car could be saved and ‘brought it back home.’

Society volunteers already have an impressive resumé, including the restoration of the Little Brown Church, a task that took 10 years. The church now houses the Pacifica Coastside Museum, which opened in 2015 and has a permanent exhibit on the railroad, a venture that seemed doomed from its start in 1905.

Construction crews along the coast had to conquer cliffs and unstable ground. Work was still underway when the 1906 earthquake hit, tearing out 4,000 feet of rails, along with engines and gear that ended up in the Pacific. The financial panic of 1907 —

triggered by the quake — wiped out some company stockholders. The line filed for bankruptcy in 1908 and reorganized, but that wasn't enough to save it a few years down the road from the competition presented by the newfangled automobile.

The line proved popular from the day it opened to the public in 1907. On weekends, the number of passengers who wanted to follow the scenic ocean route was so great that flat cars with benches were pressed into service.

The Ocean Shore Railroad had a profound impact on the San Mateo County coast. For one thing, its right-of-way set the pattern for Highway 1. In addition, many city dwellers liked the scenic area so much they became the first settlers of coastal towns. They bought land from Ocean Shore Realtors who advertised 25-by-50-foot parcels free from taxes that could be had for only \$10 down.

Few buyers actually built houses on their lots, wrote historian Barbara VanderWerf. Farmers bought the 'empty suburban tracts along its line and planted artichokes and Brussels sprouts,' she wrote.

As the San Francisco Chronicle reported in 1952, 'the rails have long since been sold as scrap. The ties have long since become fence posts in the farms and gardens between San Francisco and Santa Cruz.'

The railroad's legacy includes El Granada, the only American city that saw famed urban planner Daniel Burnham's dream become reality. Burnham wanted to integrate parks and other open space with residential areas. The railroad commissioned him to do just that, and to this day El Granada features landscaped boulevards, curving streets, traffic circles, parks and plazas.

A volunteer-run train still chugs over a short section of the Ocean Shore right-of-way near Davenport. The mile-long train operated by

the Swanton Pacific Railroad Society carries tourists through a valley in the coastal mountains.”

(“The Rear View Mirror” by history columnist Jim Clifford, San Mateo Daily Journal, April 24)

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