History of Rail Transportation in Santa Cruz County

May 10, 1869 – Leland Stanford, et al, as the Central Pacific Railroad, completes the western end of the Transcontinental Railroad and begins plans to link Northern and Southern California. Chinese laborers built the line.

Nov 26, 1871 – The Southern Pacific Railroad brings a standard gauge Railroad line to Pajaro, continues on to Salinas in 1872, and on to Soledad in 1874.

Dec 1871 – Santa Cruz County electorate approves railroad construction bonds to lure Southern Pacific – or any other railroad – to build a line from Pajaro through Santa Cruz County and northward. Pajaro Valley voted overwhelmingly against the bond measure.

1872 – Frederick A Hihn attempts to entice Southern Pacific RR to build the line into the County.

Dec 1872 – Southern Pacific surveyors begin laying out the line between Watsonville and Santa Cruz, but decide not to build it due to the Financial Panic of 1873.

Jun 1873 – Led by Claus Spreckels and FA Hihn, Santa Cruz County businessmen decide to build the railroad themselves. Due to costs it will be a narrow gauge (36 inch) line. Funds for the new Santa Cruz Railroad project include their own monies plus the previously-approved County funding.
Dec 1873 – Santa Cruz Railroad construction begins, working from Santa Cruz toward Watsonville. The majority of laborers on the line were Chinese.

Dec 7, 1874 – First five miles of Santa Cruz Railroad track are completed and Hihn asks County for payment.

Oct 1874 – Betsy Jane, a tiny construction locomotive, arrives for use by the Santa Cruz Railroad.

Dec 14, 1874 – Watsonville attorneys secure an injunction to stop payment of County funds, but construction continues with an infusion of cash from Spreckels.

Mar 1876 – Injunction is lifted and Hihn agrees to adjust route into Watsonville.

Apr 1876 – Santa Cruz Railroad’s Watsonville-Santa Cruz line is completed and the Betsy Jane locomotive delivers the first revenue load, two car loads of potatoes!

May 22, 1875 – Santa Cruz Railroad line completed only from Santa Cruz to Aptos.
History of Rail Transportation in Santa Cruz County

The end of SCRR: 1876-1883

May 1876 – Locomotive Pacific delivered to SCRR and put into service.

1877 – Locomotive Jupiter delivered (train now displayed in Smithsonian exhibit).

1876 – 1880 – Santa Cruz Railroad does reasonably well financially, but is hindered by the competition of the Southern Pacific Railroad at Pajaro, and by the threat of an over-the-mountain South Pacific Coast Railroad.

1880 – Over-the-mountain South Pacific Coast Railroad constructed between Santa Cruz and Bay Area, including 25 miles of rail and 6 tunnels, by Chinese laborers at a cost of $110,000/mile.

Feb 1881 – Santa Cruz Railroad trestle over the San Lorenzo River is brought down in a flood. Hihn, Spreckels and other stockholders no longer are willing/able to subsidize operations in the face of competition with South Pacific Coast and Southern Pacific Railroads. Santa Cruz Railroad goes into bankruptcy.

Oct 1881 – Southern Pacific (through their land management branch – Pacific Improvement Company) buys Santa Cruz Railroad at auction.

Sep 1883 – Southern Pacific replaces narrow gauge Santa Cruz Railroad with standard gauge and old narrow gauge locomotives move to other areas (eg Jupiter was sent to Ecuador to transport bananas). Chinese laborers widened the tracks.
Jan 1887 – Southern Pacific buys the over-the-mountain line (South Pacific Coast) and now controls Santa Cruz County’s two main railroad lines promoting tourism and industries.

1903 – President Theodore Roosevelt visits Santa Cruz County via train.

1927 – Southern Pacific begins the Suntan Special – an excursion train over the mountain from San Jose to the beach in Santa Cruz.

1940 – Storm closes the over-the-mountain line and it is eventually abandoned.

Apr 1940 – Suntan Special resumed going around-the-mountain through Watsonville Junction to Santa Cruz, adds 35 minutes to trip.

1941 – 1946 – Suntan Special suspended during World War II.

Late 1930s – Most popular years of Suntan Special, a round trip cost $1.25.

Jul 1947 – Sep 1959 – Suntan Special continues during the summer carrying about 900 passengers per trip.

PHOTO CREDIT: Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk Archives

PHOTO CREDIT: Michael Meuser

PHOTO CREDIT: Background Photo: Southern Pacific locomotive
Recent Rail History: 1976-2012


1996 – Union Pacific buys the Watsonville-Santa Cruz line from Southern Pacific and Rio Grande Railroads.

1996 – The RTC runs three demonstration trains on the rail line – Return of the Suntan Special, Coastal Cruzer/Flexliner, and First Night Trolley/RegioSprinter. The purpose of these events was to showcase various kinds of modern rail vehicles and explore their suitability for Santa Cruz County.

2011 – California Transportation Commission approves acquisition of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line for public ownership.

Oct 12, 2012 – RTC successfully completes acquisition deal and the Santa Cruz Branch line is now owned by the people of Santa Cruz County!

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The FUTURE of Rail Transportation in Santa Cruz County

What’s next for the Santa Cruz Branch line? Preserving the corridor for public transportation uses.

Short Term
- Increased freight rail
- Holiday/Recreational passenger rail (Train to Christmas Town)

Medium Term
- Bicycle/Pedestrian “rail trail” segments of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Network

Long Term
- Expanded passenger rail service
- Completion of the 31 mile spine of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Network

And On...