

Roaring Camp & Big Trees Narrow-Gauge Railroad

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INTRODUCTION

Deep in the heart of the majestic redwood forests of California's Santa Cruz Mountains remains America's last steam-powered passenger railroad, the historic Roaring Camp and Big Trees Narrow-Gauge Railroad. This small railroad lies on Santa Cruz County's Big Trees Ranch which is the site of one of the first American communities west of the Rocky Mountains. Roaring Camp and Big Trees Narrow-Gauge Railroad operates passenger trains over a six mile roundtrip route up steep redwood decked Bear Mountain. Upon arrival at the Bear Mountain station, passengers can detrain for a picnic or a quiet hike through the forests and return on a later train. The use of vintage equipment allows the passengers the rare opportunity to ride back into history through the famous Welch Big Trees Grove of giant California coastal redwood trees. The Roaring Camp and Big Trees Narrow-Gauge Railroad is wholly-owned by Roaring Camp Inc., a California corporation. Although the company now operates the steam passenger trains as an entertainment for visitors, the history behind this little train station proves the job a difficult one to undertake.

ROARING CAMP INCORPORATED

I. Board of Directors

- A. A. J. Babcock
- B. F. N. Clark
- C. G. P. Clark
- D. G. Cordingly
- E. J. B. DeNault
- F. H. G. Elliot, Sr.
- G. F. A. Hackman

II. Officers

- A. President and General Manager: F. N. Clark
- B. Vice-President: H. G. Elliot, Sr.
- C. Secretary/Treasurer: H. G. Elliot, Sr.
- D. Vice-President of Operations: G. P. Clark

III. Shareholders

- A. Approximately one-thousand and eight-hundred shareholders

IV. Employees

- A. Thirty-five full time employees
- B. Approximately forty part time and seasonal employees

The Corporation began in 1935 when all but eight-hundred feet of the railroad line across the Santa Cruz mountains had been lost. Norman Clark, with twenty-five dollars in his pocket, received a ninety-nine year lease on a hundred and seventy-five acres of the original Welch acreage to restore passenger train service.¹ Clark, with the assistance of his brother, Bruce Clark, laid the three-miles of steep and winding tracks. The investments began with two five-hundred dollar donations from two former employers and later, twenty-three friends invested money to make Roaring Camp Incorporated a business with over one thousand and eight-hundred shareholders.² The company, who receives it's income from individual and group visitors, is a featured attraction in the United States and international tour programs to California. Today Roaring Camp has five steam locomotives, three railcars, one diesel locomotive, twelve passenger cars, eight freight and maintenance-of-way cars and a steam powered sawmill.³ Along with this equipment, Roaring Camp has one hundred and seventy-five acres containing a steam-operated railroad, with a general store, depot, saloon (made of a caboose and serving soft drinks) and other assorted period establishments.⁴

1. Villa-McDowell, Terri, "Story Behind the Building of a Railroad Attraction," California Travel Report, no-date given, pp.62-64

2. "Roaring Camp Fact Sheet", Nov.1982, circular for R.C. & B.T.N.G.R.

3. Villa-McDowell, p.62

4. Villa-McDowell, p.62

(con't from p.3)

Although the town is booming, Clark still envisions a town of fifty buildings, a hotel on Bear Mountain with fireplaces in every room and a view of the Monterey Bay.⁵ The company has built a strong group sales business and their tour business has grown steadily worldwide. The annual total attendance is estimated about two-hundred thousand people with many spreading the word of the beauty of this little camp. Steam passenger train operations are scheduled every day of the year except Christmas Day with from one to eight departures per day upon seasonal demand.⁶ The roundtrip time is approximately one hour and twenty-five minutes.

5. Villa-McDowell, p.63

6. Villa-McDowell, p.63

In 1842, Isaac Graham, nephew of Daniel Boone, built the first power sawmill west of the Rocky Mountains at a site near Roaring Camp. Graham brought Lieutenant John C. Fremont and Colonel John A. Sutter to Roaring Camp to organize an army against the Mexicans called the Bear Flag revolt. From this revolt, the Mexican authorities named this camp of wild men. The authorities found the "Americans" a boisterous lot and referred to the settlement in a language that could politely be interpreted as "Roaring Camp".

Graham died in 1863 and in 1867 arrangements were made to sell the Roaring Camp lands to local loggers.⁷ Instead, Joseph Welch intervened at the last moment and spared the Big Trees the axe. The deed was recorded December 26, 1867 and Welch thereby became the first man in history to save the California Coastal Redwoods for posterity.⁸

Needled by Welch's purchase, the local lumbermen hired George Wright to survey a railroad line from Santa Cruz to a point that was one hundred feet beyond the Welch property. This then encouraged Wright to lay out a townsite which he named Felton.

7. Roaring Camp Fact Sheet, (September, 1982)

8. Roaring Camp Fact Sheet, (September, 1982)

(con't from p.5)

Wright recommended that the railroad line from Santa Cruz be constructed to a narrower width than standard railroads in order to negotiate the sharp curves required in the San Lorenzo River Canyon.⁹ This recommendation led to the beginning of the Santa Cruz & Felton line.

9. Roaring Camp Fact Sheet. (September, 1982)

Railroad Proposal

Prior to the Civil War, there was practically no attempt made to create a standard track width, and those in common use varied from 3'6" to 6".¹⁰ The importance of having the same track width as the connecting roads was not evident to the designers, since there were practically no adjoining roads. The special contribution of George Wright and the Western United States to the history of track width, was the development of the so-called "narrow-gauge", 3'6" track.¹¹ A narrow gauge railroad of the 1870's measured 36 inches or 3 feet between wheels. All equipment for a narrow gauge railroad was smaller and less expensive than standard gauge equipment, but narrow gauge was sufficient, if not better, than the rival standard gauge.¹² Wright imposed the idea that the narrow gauge road was better suited for mountainous country, because the tractive power would be greater for steep grades.¹² With this proposal, Felton's pathway was opened to becoming an active and growing city. The opportunity arose when the Southern Pacific Railroad took over the South Pacific line and extended a branch into Old Felton which became the Santa Cruz & Felton Branch, a subsidiary of the new South Pacific Coast Railway.

10. Reigel, Robert Egar, "The Story of the Western Railroads" (Mcmillan Co. reprint 1926), p.6

11. Dalke, Scott, "The South Pacific Coast Railroad and The Southern Pacific Coast Railroad in the Almaden Valley" (California, 1978)

12. Reigel, Robert Egar, p.6

(con't from p.7)

The Southern Pacific Railroad originally was proposed to run through the mountains, not by way of present-day Los Gatos, but through Saratoga (then called McCartyville) and over the summit in the vicinity of Waterman's Gap (at the present junction of State Highway 9 and the Big Basin road). It was to continue on down along the San Lorenzo River through Boulder Creek and connect with the Santa Cruz & Felton line at Felton.¹³ Although this appeared a logical route, the mountains required immense tunnelling and large sums of money were needed to complete this treacherous route.

13. Young, John V. "Ghost Towns of the Santa Cruz Mountains" (California, 1979), p.35

The Santa Cruz & Felton

With Wright's proposal and his being backed by the local lumberman, the Santa Cruz & Felton Line became operation proof of the practicality of railroad logging. Against Welch's opposed construction and operation of this railroad, the California legislature granted a charter to the Santa Cruz & Felton Company. The small logging line had its lumber transfer laid between the flume and railroad at Felton, its turntable installed and the Santa Cruz & Felton was soon joined by sister Porter Felton.¹⁴ The operation was the stimulus the redwood industry needed and the sawmill, soon cutting lumber at near-capacity, sent thirty-thousand board feet down the canyon each day.¹⁵ If the Santa Cruz & Felton Line's treasury had held out as it's directors had wished, the little railroad might have spanned the range of hills into the Santa Clara Valley. The pair was virgin and there were no previously-established surveys to show the railroad a trail between the Los Gatos & Felton Line.¹⁶ The South Pacific Coast came down the northeast slope of the valley, crossed Zayante Creek and just on the other side, the depot of Felton was established.

14. MacGregor, Bruce A. "South Pacific Coast", (California, 1968), p.123

15. MacGregor, p.124

16. MacGregor, p.124

(con't from p.9)

This led to local train service into Old Felton for passenger connections and lumber pickups. Near the end of 1877 the expanding South Pacific Coast entered into a lease agreement with the Santa Cruz & Felton, under which the South Pacific Coast assumed full managerial control of the small line's tracks, rolling stock and flume as of the close of the year.¹⁷ The actual connection of the two lines was effected a mile south from Felton, at Felton Junction. This transferral of ownership led to the permanent depot and freight house structures at Felton and the station becoming the largest revenue source anywhere on the narrow gauge.

¹⁷. MacGregor, p.127

¹⁷. MacGregor, p.127

The Trip Over The Mountains

On August 22, 1879, a man by the name of George Lewis Colegrove started working for the South Pacific Coast Railroad. Although Colegrove still owned a "jumper" stage-coach service that went over the mountains into Felton, he became the first railroad conductor to drive over the Santa Cruz Mountains. Hired by the president of the South Pacific Coast, Alfred E. "Hog" Davis, Colegrove began a direct service line from Alameda to Santa Cruz where it met with the Santa Cruz & Felton Line. Building a railroad through the mountains was a rewarding, but very difficult and expensive job. Costing one hundred and ten thousand dollars per mile in the mountains, the South Pacific Coast Railroad was the most expensive narrow gauge of the era to build.¹⁸

¹⁸ Payne, Steven. "A Howling Wilderness" (California, 1978), p.37

(con't from p.11)

Eventhough the trains first run ended in a disaster as the train ran off the track near Rincon, it signaled the end of the stage coach era in the Santa Cruz Mountains.¹⁹

With the general acceptance of the idea that a narrow gauge road was better suited for the mountainous country, construction began through the mountains. On October 13, 1875 construction work on the railroad was completed and the first passenger train steamed the six miles from Santa Cruz to Fleets over the three-foot gauge track.²⁰ Quickly recognizing the sightseeing value of the Big Trees, Welch reversed his position on the railroad and opened his grove to visiting passengers, charging twenty-five cents per person for admission.²¹ With this, Welch named the land the Welch Big Trees Grove of giant California coastal redwood trees.

19. Payne, p.37

20. Fact Sheet, (September, 1983)

21. Fact Sheet, (September, 1983)

The Picnic Line Expands

During the 1880's, 90's and early 1900's so many people road the three-foot gauge subsidiary down into the Big Trees, that the railroad became affectionately known as the "Picnic Line". People came from all over the county to ride the narrow gauge train into the famous Welch Big Trees Grove. Eventually, like all things in this progressive world, a change must come about and the narrow gauge(3'0" wide) track was converted to a standard gauge(4'8-1/2") track by adding a third rail to make the wider gauge. This track was now able to operate both gauges effectively and economically. The overpowering standard gauge track replaced narrow gauge from the San Francisco Bay upto the Big Trees station. This left the Santa Cruz & Felton line on narrow gauge track which extremely benefitted the line.

At the peak of narrow gauge operations, a dozen passenger trains a day called at the Felton and Roaring Camp area.²² This brought in great revenue for the owners of both Roaring Camp and the Welch Big Trees Grove. However, by 1935 business had declined to the point that the railroad was torn up to Boulder Creek.²³ Then in 1940 a severe winter storm washed out the track across the Santa Cruz Mountains and the mainline to San Francisco Bay area was abandoned, leaving the Santa Cruz & Felton railroad an isolated branch line.²⁴

22. Fact Sheet, (September, 1983)

23. Fact Sheet, (September, 1983)

24. Fact Sheet, (September, 1983)

Roaring Camp & Big Trees Narrow Gauge Railroad

With Norman Clark's purchase of the deteriorated Santa Cruz line, the birth of a tourist attraction was made. Clark took investments from his friends and former employers, and made Roaring Camp the pleasant place it is now. Clark and his wife Georgiana began entertaining in 1869 at Roaring Camp and barbecues and dancing have been a regular feature at the camp ever since. Visitors reach Roaring Camp by walking across an old covered bridge, one of the few left in the State, and down a country lane into the Roaring Camp depot.²⁵ The historic steam locomotive chugs it's way toward Bear Mountain, over Indian Creek, crossing over a cedwood forest canyon on a spectacular horseshoe loop trestle* before chugging toward the summit of the mountain, immersing riders in the beautiful scenery of the Santa Cruz Mountains.²⁶

25. Villa-McDowell, p.63

26. Villa-McDowell, p.63

* On June 27, 1976, 6:20 pm, the two trestles burned in a sheet of flame from one end to another. The fire damages were to the extent of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Arson is suspected and the company is inviting contributions from individuals to help rebuild an exciting part of the railroad ride into the past. The company has set up a switchback* network so that the passengers are still able to make the customary round trip to Bear Mountain.

*switchback: an arrangement of zigzag railroad tracks for overcoming the grade of a steep hill.

Roaring Camp Through a Camera

To begin looking at Roaring Camp & Big Trees Narrow Gauge Railroad through a camera turn to the page marked "c.1". Pictures labeled(1,2) show engine #1, "Dixiana" a 42-ton 2-truck Shay (Lima 1912) backing up to be filled with water to support it's steam-powered engine. When entering Roaring Camp the covered bridge(3) and sign(2) begin the trip into the past. Following the country lane will bring the viewer upon a railroad crossing(5) and the directions as to where you would like to begin your tour(6). Walking into camp you will come upon the General Store(7) and the Red Caboose Saloon(8). At the General Store you may buy an assortment of items of the pioneer days. The depot at Roaring Camp is in the process of expansion(9), and the signs posted on the depot(10,11) inform passengers of departure times, coming events and train stops. As the Dixiana fills her water compressor(12), the conductor and crew prepare for departure. (13,14) Before leaving the station, the conductor gives the passengers and the camera last instructions. (15-17) At last the train is off(18) and the engine lets off some steam as the Dixiana turns the bend for it's trip up Bear Mountain. (19-21) Moments after the Dixiana has left the station, engine #2, "Tuolumne" a 37-ton 2-truck Heisler(Stearns 1899) pull into the station for the next load of passengers. (22-24) Tuolumne lets off a cloud of steam and sets off for Bear Mountain behind sister engine Dixiana. (25-28) The passengers will be very pleased with the beauty of the ride through the California coastal redwoods.

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