

Tracking down Lodi's railroad history

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Lodi wouldn't be where it is today if it wasn't for the influence of the railroads.

Railroad fever gripped Northern California in 1862 when Western Pacific Railroad planned to connect San Jose and Stockton and Sacramento via rail. California Gov. Leland Stanford was so anxious to get started that year, he started digging the line himself in Sacramento.



An overview photograph taken early in the last century shows the Sacramento Street tracks near the Lodi depot, which was situated farther north than its present location. ([Courtesy photo](#))

A few years later, Stanford would join Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins and Collis P. Huntington -- California's Big Four -- and set up the Central California Railroad which built the western half of the nation's first transcontinental railroad. The Central Pacific, building east, finally met the westbound Union Pacific at Promontory Summit, Utah in 1869, thus uniting the nation on "a ribbon of steel."

But laying track through Lodi wasn't part of the original 1862 plan, historians say.

Woodbridge was the first choice of routes to connect Sacramento and Stockton. However, a great flood submerged the targeted route and sent planners from Central Pacific, which had bought out the financially troubled Western Pacific, looking for an alternate route.

Enter four landowners who petitioned the railroad to lay track through their land in 1869, in what is now north of Lodi.

The railroad quickly accepted their donation, especially since the deal included giving the railroad every odd numbered lot in town and 12 acres for a their stations and depots.

The project took a turn south when engineers contemplated how to get over the river via a bridge.

"Railroads are really flat and this was the steepest grade between here and Portland," said Ralph Lea of the Lodi Historical Society.

The current town of Lodi was built south of the donated land so trains could gain speed before having to climb the steep grade over the river, he said.

In 1869, a trip of first passengers from Sacramento to Stockton was temporarily derailed. The train stopped in Lodi first and people disembarked, thinking it was Stockton. It took some 90 minutes to get the Sacramentans back on the train, peevish dignitaries waiting to greet them in Stockton.

Timeline

1862: Western Pacific plans to build rails connecting Sacramento to Stockton to San Jose.

1864: Western Pacific goes broke.

1868: Central Pacific takes over.

1869: The Transcontinental Railroad is completed with a golden spike in Promontory Summit, Utah.

1869: The first passenger train from Sacramento to Stockton stops in Mokelumne City.

1882: The San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Railroad begins constructing a line from Brack's Landing to Clements.

1896: Democratic presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan's whistle-stop campaign rolls through Lodi.

1907: First Central California Traction Company's electric passenger train comes to town.

1933: The last CCT passenger train leaves Lodi.

1946: Freight operations switch from electric to diesel.

1998: Direct CCT line to Sacramento is decommissioned.

2000: Then-Republican nominee George W. Bush makes a campaign tour stop on a special Amtrak train.

In 1882, the San Joaquin and Sierra Nevada Railroad began construction on a narrow gauge rail that eventually connected Lodi to Lockeford, Clements and Valley Springs. The railroad would later be bought another railroad that was purchased by Southern Pacific. In 1927, an extension of the line would bring cement from Calaveras Cement for the construction of Pardee Dam, but passengers often used the line to travel to annual picnic days in Clements.

Another passenger rail provider came to town in 1907 when the California Traction Company laid rail along Lodi Avenue and a main line east of Lodi. Service expanded in 1910 from Stockton to Sacramento.

The first ticket station for CCT was a drugstore on the corner of Elm and Sacramento streets that sold tickets for a nickel to Lodi Avenue. The trains even acted as school buses, taking kids to grammar school.

Kids also partook in small town fun at Lodi Junction on the CCT line, where an electrified third rail switched to overhead lines before coming into the city. Children dared each other to jump over the third rail, which also shocked many rabbits and dogs, Lea said.

Wells Fargo and the railroads called the town Mokelumne Station, but due to the similarly named towns of Mokelumne City and Mokelumne Hill, the town's name was changed to Lodi in 1874. "They needed a short name that people could spell," Lea said.

Southern Pacific discontinued their passenger service in the '30s and in the '80s service from Lodi east was stopped. In the 1970s using trucks for shipping caused CCT to reduce its service.

By 1998, the line from Sacramento to Lodi was out of service, but Central California Traction Company continues to use their Stockton to Lodi line to ship grain, plastics and agricultural produce to this day and Union Pacific uses their central California line to connect Lodi to the rest of the West.