

# THE DEVIL'S SHORTLINE

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MT. DIABLO & SAN JOSE RAILROAD  
1900 — 1907



MOUNT DIABLO, CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

*Marshall McDonald Photo*

By  
TEODORO GUSANO III

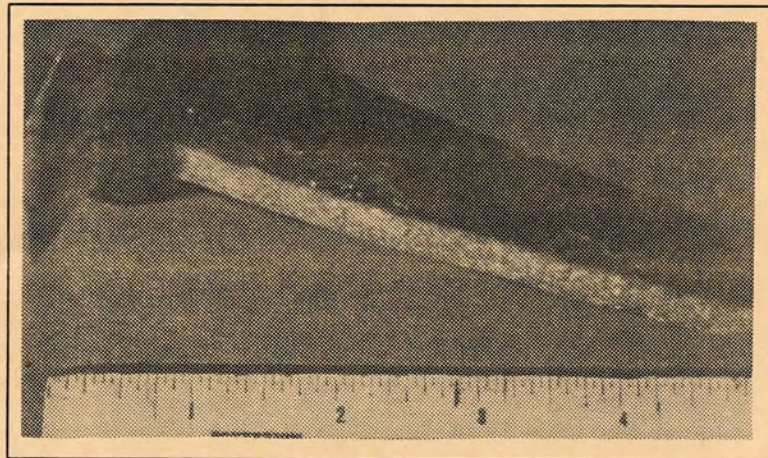


# **THE DEVIL'S SHORTLINE**

MT. DIABLO & SAN JOSE RAILROAD  
A FORGOTTEN CALIFORNIA NARROW GAUGE

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BY  
TEODORO GUSANO III



Relic from Tassajara Creek

A HARDY BOOK FROM ROSS VALLEY

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ROSS VALLEY BOOKS  
ALBANY, CALIF.  
1988



## **FOREWORD**

Many of the details concerning construction of the long-forgotten "Devil's Short Line" were related to the author by his grandfather, Teodoro Gusano I. The first Teodoro's grandfather had been a Spanish soldier in early California, who, being of relatively low rank, had received a small grant of land upon his discharge from the military. This first Gusano in California, Fernando Gusano, settled on his few acres in Arroyo de los Caballos near Marsh Creek in the northeastern foothills of Mount Diablo.

Teodoro Gusano I remembered the Mount Diablo coal mines and their small rail lines near the family homestead. And he spoke often of how the Empire Railroad was later extended across the Gusano Rancho and up the eastern slopes of Mount Diablo. As an old man he kept a small boxful of keepsakes from the railroad promoters — advertising flyers, construction progress reports, a few old news clippings and a handful of faded photos of poor quality.

These priceless records were among many family treasures destroyed when grandfather's home at St. Helena was lost in a fire in 1937. But he repeated the story to his grandchildren many times, having as a boy been fascinated by the narrow-gauge engines and trains and the difficult construction work. He had actually worked for several months on construction of the railroad and in the company's quarry near the old rancho.

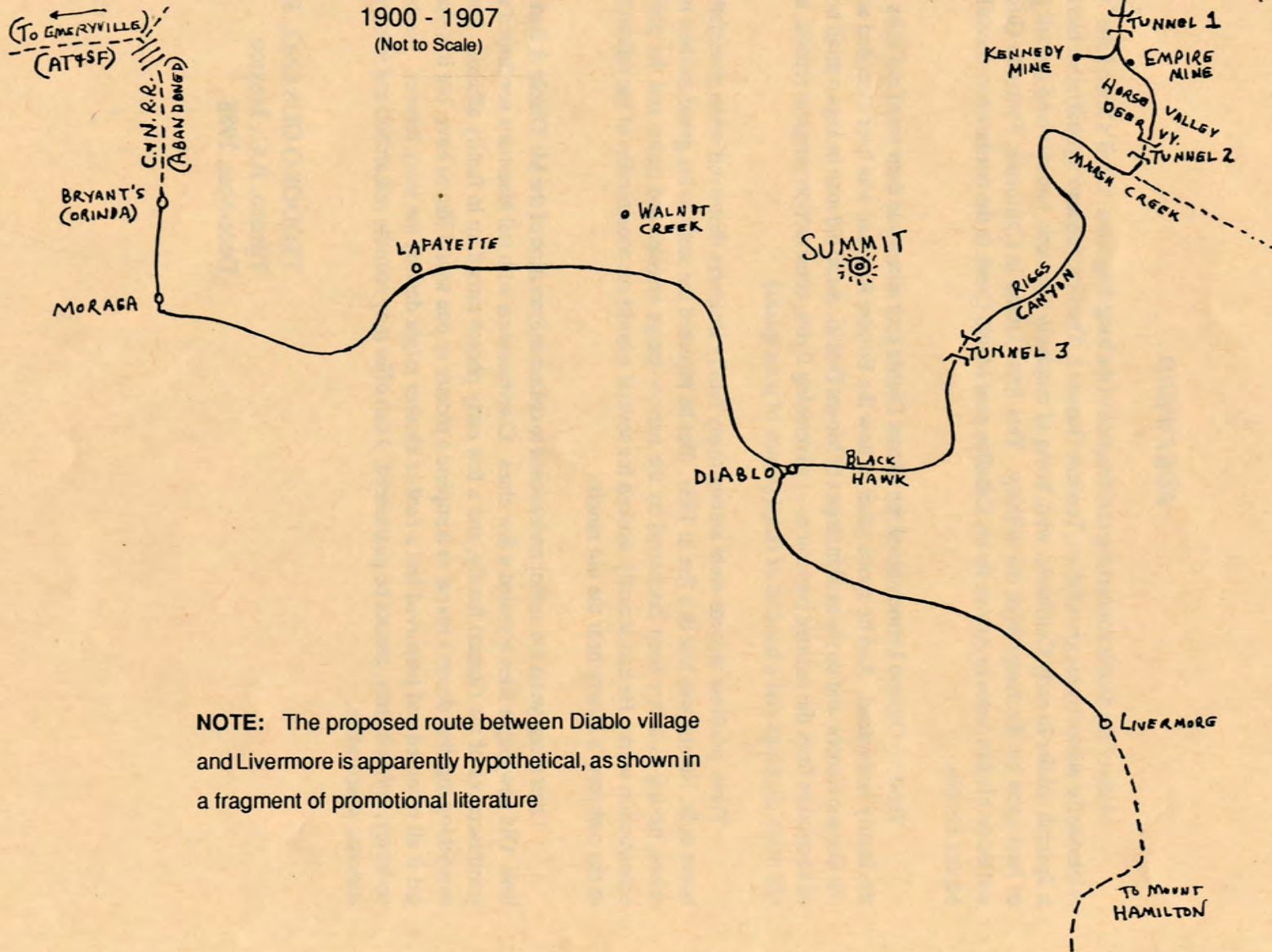
Over many years the author endeavored to collect information of the Mt. Diablo & San Jose line. Old newspaper files revealed a few clues. Conversations with rail historians confirmed early reminiscences of the Gusano family, and a few early photos turned up in family albums. Putting everything together doesn't reveal as complete a picture as one would like to have, but it is time to get it all recorded and preserved lest a further disaster might destroy the story forever. Historical accuracy, unfortunately, cannot be guaranteed. I can offer only soundly researched and reasonably accurate speculation.

TEODORO GUSANO, III  
Tijuana, B.C., Mexico  
December, 1988

Mount Diablo & San Jose R.R.  
(NARROW GAUGE)

"THE DEVIL'S SHORT LINE"

1900 - 1907  
(Not to Scale)



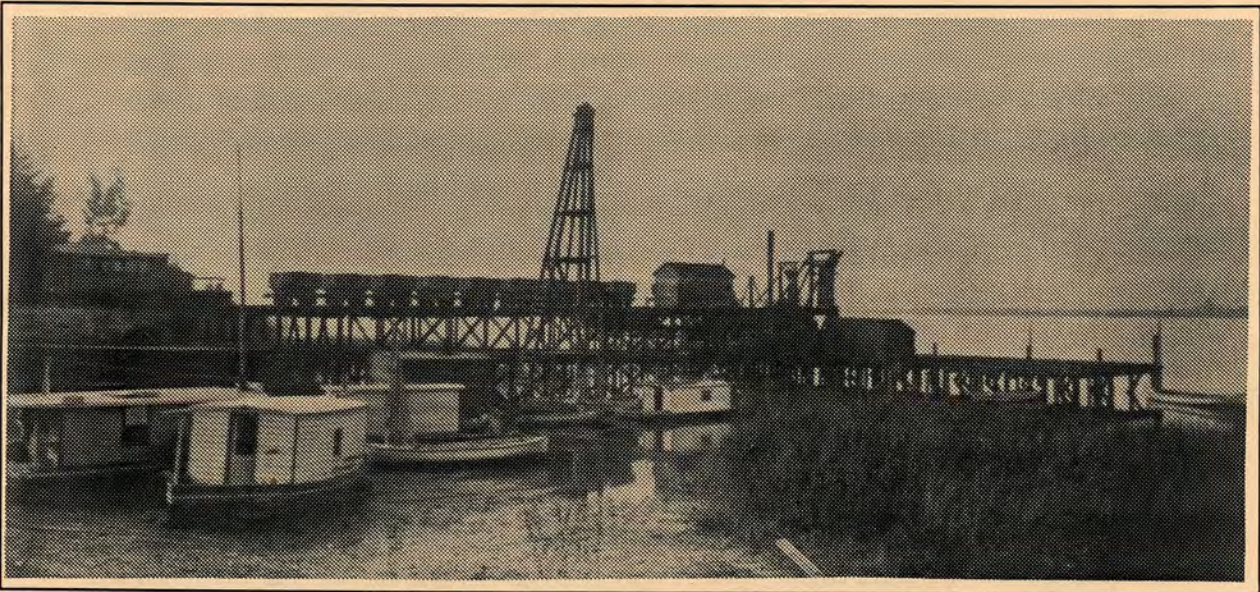
NOTE: The proposed route between Diablo village and Livermore is apparently hypothetical, as shown in a fragment of promotional literature

(CHAPTER ONE)

The skimpy saga of this mysterious, long-forgotten California narrow gauge railroad line actually begins with an even more obscure line that was proposed in the booming expansion era that followed upon completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869.

Less than seven years later, after a multitude of rail lines — both horse drawn and steam — had sprung up, yet another was proposed in Oakland. It was to be a steam-operated railroad of three-foot narrow gauge, running north on Market Street from the estuary to the city limits, and perhaps beyond to Berkeley and as far as Martinez. The *Oakland News* described the company as “a corporation of citizens.....” and announced on March 15, 1876, that a locomotive and some cars had arrived and a “portion of track has been laid.” The engine had been built at Buffalo, New York, it was reported.

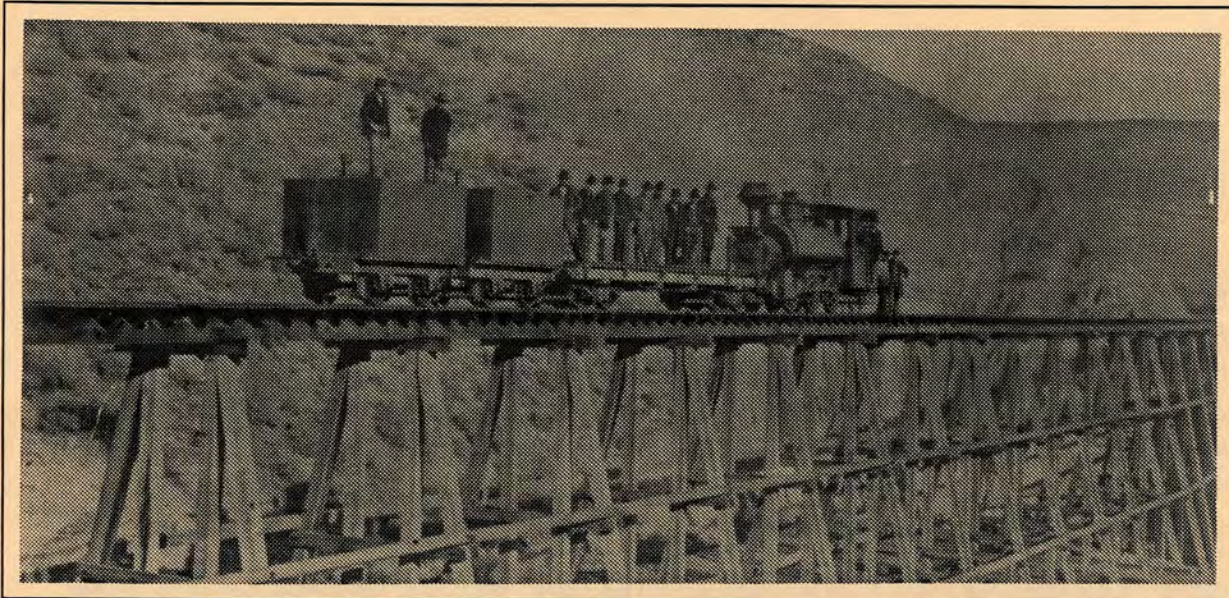
Just a day later opposition to the Oakland, Berkeley and Contra Costa Railroad (for such it was named) made itself felt in the form of a wall across the track. This must have been during the hours of darkness, for the engine ran into this wall and damaged its headlight. Later in the day a Mr. Kennedy of the railroad management and a Mr. Jesse Wall “skirmished” at the post office and Kennedy’s eyes “were blackened,” according to *Oakland News*.



Empire Coal Mine Railroad Landing at San Joaquin River  
Antioch, California, ca. 1885

Oakland’s popular mayor, Dr. George Pardee (later governor of California), entered the fray on March 17th, championing the “question of a railroad down Market Street” and suggested drawing up a proper franchise so the “people will know what is going on and who else is involved.”

A mass meeting was held on the night of March 24th, at which 3000 people were present to support and cheer the prospect of “one victory over the Central Pacific monopoly.” In reporting on the meeting *Oakland News* said “We know and trust all the men behind the OB & CC,” whose proposals included a ferry service to reach San Francisco in 17 1/2 minutes. Central Pacific was now openly fighting this competition and much of the evening was spent exposing the CP’s schemes at Sacramento and elsewhere.



Locomotive "Empire" of Empire Coal Mine Railroad  
on trestle above Tunnel 1. 0-60 type. 1885

The *News* on April 3, 1876, reported a new angle on the story "Railroad Mass Meeting (at Dietz Hall)" and this was a meeting to oppose the new railroad. The people did not want steam trains running on Market Street. Besides, it was pointed out, there was no assurance that the promoters would actually go beyond Oakland. This gathering, obviously promoted by Central Pacific, must have provided the final blow, as evidenced by the last item to be found in the *Oakland News*, this on April 6th. The gist of it was that the proponents should not give up. Wait, they were advised; the OB&CC is not killed yet, even though Central Pacific controls the legislature. Nothing further was reported.

#### (CHAPTER TWO)

Oakland, Berkeley & Contra Costa Railroad was never heard of again, but a clue turns up in the coal-mining region on the northern slopes of Mount Diablo. For about 20 years beginning in 1878, there was a narrow-gauge coal-hauling railroad (Empire Coal Mine and Railroad Company) serving the easternmost mines of the Mount Diablo field. This particular rail line carried coal from mines at Stewartsville, Hartley, Empire, and other locations to a ship landing at the town of Antioch on San Joaquin River. Longest haul was the eight miles from Stewartsville at the end of a two-mile branch. In fact, there were several spurs and branches running off the Empire line, most of them serving various coal outcroppings owned and controlled by Mortimer Belshaw and Egbert Judson<sup>1</sup>

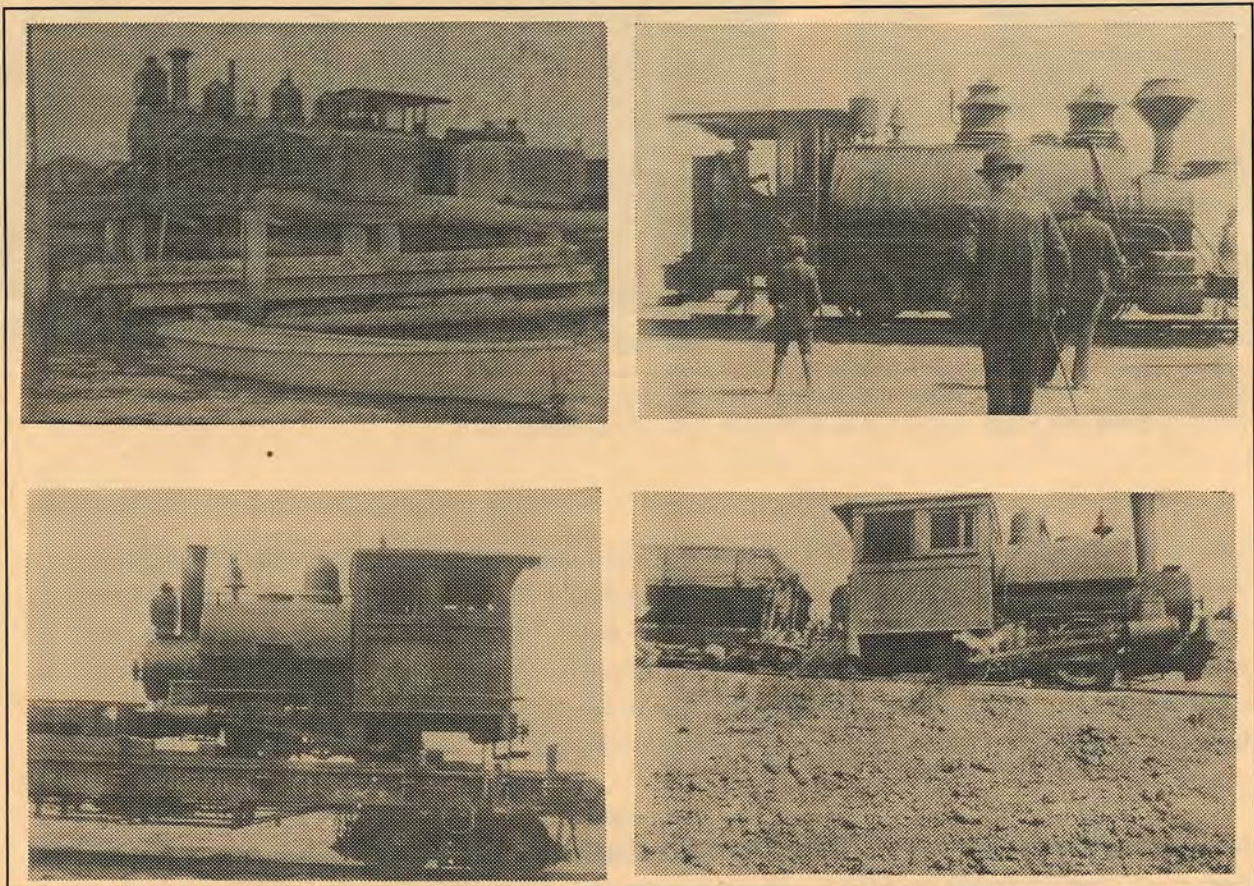
There exists information on one obscure independent mine having its own six-wheel locomotive which delivered loaded cars of coal to the Empire rail line just west of the Corcoran Mine. The engine had been built by David Bell<sup>2</sup> in Buffalo, Y. at the beginning of 1871, which ties in with data on the old Oakland, Berkeley and Contra Costa. And the general manager of this independent mine operation was one William Kennedy, which again suggests the OB&CC of 1876<sup>3</sup>.



When the Belshaw and Judson system of mines closed in 1897, the Kennedy operation remained in production and operated their locomotive over the Empire Railroad tracks to bunkers at Antioch Landing. There was a brief re-opening of Empire properties by C.M. Wilson of San Francisco, who spent considerable sums of money on rehabilitation of mines and the railroad. But in a very short time the entire operation was shut down again. The Empire trackage and two locomotives were leased to Kennedy at this point, since his old Bell engine had reached the end of its useful life.

(CHAPTER THREE)

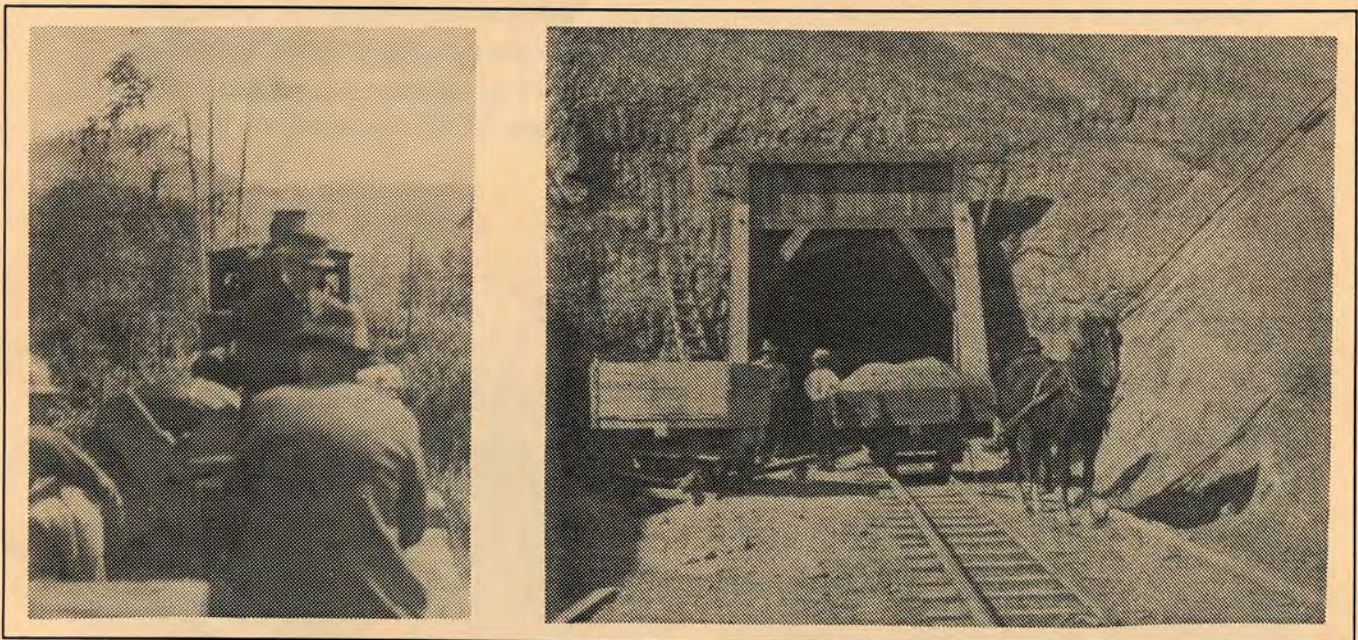
In March, 1900, William Kennedy<sup>4</sup> approached a number of businessmen in Antioch, Oakland, and Stockton with a new railroad scheme on an unprecedented scale. He proposed a narrow-gauge "tourist and picnic" line to use the old Empire trackage out of Antioch and extend same around and part way up Mount Diablo, thence to gradually work down the south side of the mountain into fertile San Ramon Valley<sup>5</sup> From there the tracks could be run virtually unimpeded to thriving Livermore and on south around the west side of Mount Hamilton into popular Alum Rock Park and San Jose. This would be, Kennedy proposed, a blow against SP-CP monopoly of Bay Area Transportation.



Four locos of Devil's Shortline. Top (left) MD&SJ No. 2 at Antioch Landing, ca. 1905; (right) "Jennie Belshaw" leased from Empire Mine, c. 1900. Bottom (left) Porter quarry loco arriving, 1900; (right) Derailment in Horse Valley, ca. 1905.

An attractive Bay Area connection would be proposed branch from the Diablo foothills northwestward through Lafayette and Moraga to J.S. Emery's struggling California & Nevada narrow gauge, which straggled from Emeryville as far as Bryant's (present Orinda). This would be an ideal route for anticipated heavy agricultural shipments out of San Ramon Valley. Finding enthusiastic response, helped by John Muir's letter of endorsement, the Mount Diablo & San Jose Railroad was incorporated in July, 1900.

The new line started near Empire Mine, from which point grading and tracklaying began almost immediately. The Empire R.R. engines "Jennie Belshaw" and "Empire" on lease were ideally suited to this work, in addition to their duties in hauling loads of coal from Kennedy Mine down to the river landing. For the picnic and other passengers runs to be soon started, a capped-stack ten-



Construction Trains: Left, workmen and engineers enroute near upper Marsh creek, 1901. Right, Tunnel No. 3 at upper end Riggs Canyon, elevation 1200, mile 16. January 1901.

wheeler Baldwin locomotive was bought second hand from a narrow-gauge railroad in Nevada. It was given the number 2 and unofficially named "Sagehen." At least one small Porter "dinky" four-wheel saddle-tanker (and probably two, according to some sources) was acquired to operate in the company's rock quarry along the route in Horse Valley. Rock for ballast was produced here, and the company was hard pressed to keep up with demand for this material from the Santa Fe Railroad, then building westward toward San Francisco Bay and directly past the Short Line's bunkers at Antioch<sup>6</sup>

A number of dump cars, three flats, and two water cars, left behind when Empire Mine quit, were picked up for a song and the flats were immediately equipped to carry passengers. Revenue from heavy coal shipments and the lucrative ballast business helped finance the initial construction work and purchase of the Empire's original rail trackage into Antioch.<sup>7</sup>



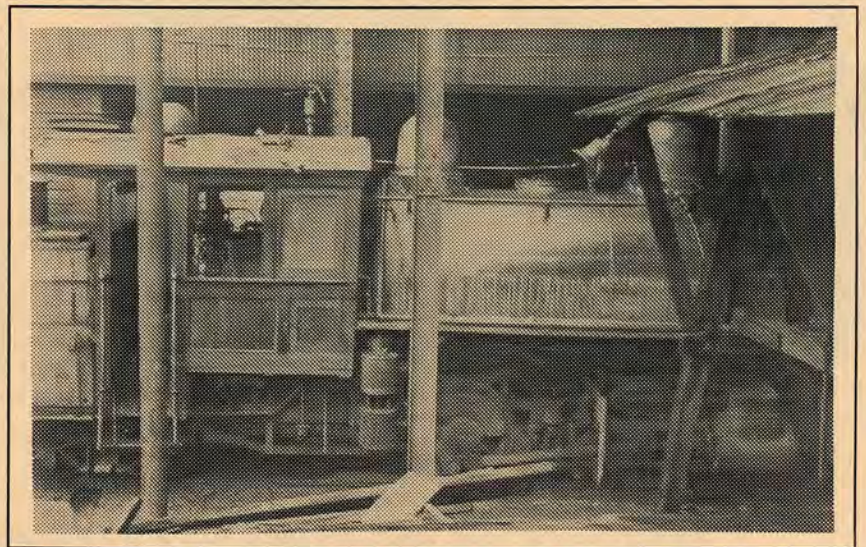
Beyond the rails: Survey party near Livermore, 1900, and the grade along upper Alameda Creek above Calaveras Valley, on slopes of Mount Hamilton, 1977.

(CHAPTER FOUR)

A publicity department sprang into action even as tracks were being laid. Colorful posters appeared on all available fences, barns, wagons and poles from Martinez to Brentwood. Small copies were handed out by businessmen to their customers. "TRAIN RIDES UP (sic) MOUNT DIABLO"— "PICNICS IN COOL MARSH CREEK CANYON"— "SEE EXCITING BRIDGE WORK, TUNNELS, CLIFFHANGING TRACKWORK." Newspaper articles told of fabulous views to



Work train in Riggs Canyon north of Tunnel 3, 1901.



Locomotive 5, 0-4-4 by Porter (purchased 1900). Shown at Mountain Copper Company many years later.

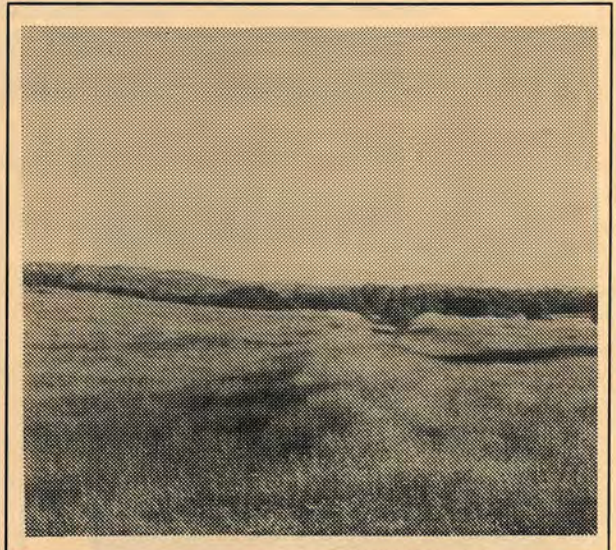
come, since virtually all of Central California would be in view from the "Scenic Railway" trains. One odd and far-fetched future attraction was mentioned: a birdwatchers' Sunday boat trip (connections via California & Nevada Railroad's lines to Emeryville Landing), via the company's "Own Steamer *Rosalie*" to the "Heavenly Farallone Islands."<sup>8</sup>

Roadbed grading and tracklaying continued past the new quarry in Horse Valley, about six miles out of Antioch. From there the work went fairly easily around the edge of a ridge to the east and south again into Deer Valley at elevation 300 (above sea level). To get into the next valley and thence to Marsh Creek, a half-mile tunnel (No. 2) at elevation 400 brought the tracks into Briones Valley and south into the canyon of Marsh Creek. Again, grading proceeded fairly rapidly westward along the creekside, and then southward as the waterway turned abruptly into the mountain terrain. At this point elevation 600 had been achieved, about 13 1/2 miles out of Antioch.

Steepest grade, according to the old engineering notes, came in grading up Riggs Canyon to Tunnel No. 3. This was near milepost 16 at an elevation of almost 1200 feet above sea level. This location afforded, according to the builders, marvelous views eastward and northward over the California Delta region and vast areas of Central California as far east as the summit of the Sierra Nevada Range. Out of the tunnel, grading went more or less southward along Tassajara Creek watershed. Tracklayers followed rapidly. The Sunday sightseeing and picnic trains were now crowded as word got out telling of the wonders to be seen and the pleasures to be enjoyed along Marsh Creek. A pair of new Porter-built 2-4-4 locomotives had been acquired for work train service, but on the busy Sunday runs now, one of these was detailed to assist old No. 2, the former Nevada engine. The numbers 5 and 6 had been assigned to the new locomotives, so it can be assumed that there were two quarry dinkys numbered 3 and 4.<sup>9</sup>



Abandoned cars near quarry site in Deer Valley, south of Antioch, ca. 1922



Horse Valley 70 years after abandonment, showing grade.

Tracklaying continued, now westward across present-day Black Hawk Ranch (elevation 800), thence descending to the tiny settlement of Diablo at a point 22 miles from Antioch. At this place the main line surveys continued southward along San Ramon Valley, thence toward Livermore and the hills leading to Mount Hamilton. Kennedy and his board of directors had originally hoped to be able to join up with the South Pacific Coast Railroad north of San Jose, a company of similar gauge. But now this line was in the Southern Pacific fold and would soon be converted to standard gauge.

(CHAPTER FIVE)

In July, 1901, with rails as far as Diablo, a decision was made to rush the north-westward branch line toward the Bay Area, via Lafayette and Moraga. This would connect with the California & Nevada at Bryant's, as originally contemplated, providing a through line for passengers to San Francisco as an alternate to the slow and sometimes dangerous river steamers. It would also be a rapid and profitable freight connection for the San Ramon Valley agricultural products. It would appear that concentrating construction efforts on the branch through Lafayette and Moraga caused diminishing expenditures on the so-called "main line" headed for Livermore and beyond. There is evidence, however, that grading reached some miles beyond Livermore and the survey party continued to charge ahead. In fact, an old photo showing twin tunnels purporting to be on the Mount Hamilton slopes has been found, although it is doubtful if any rails were ever laid beyond Livermore.

It seems that work came to a gradual halt on the "main line" about 60 miles south of Antioch, shortly before the 1906 earthquake. The branch westward through Moraga never met California & Nevada tracks, since that line's first eleven miles between Emeryville and Richmond were sold to Santa Fe as a route into Oakland. C & N's "country stub" to Bryant's station from San Pablo became useless when the important first half was taken away.

The earthquake caused much damage to the hilly sections of Devil's Short Line on the slopes of Mt. Diablo. Shaky finances and impossible repair expenses caused the owners to abandon first the section from Antioch to Diablo village and by 1907 the entire project was abandoned. Much of the route of the branch westward through Lafayette and Moraga was utilized by Oakland & Antioch electric railway a few years later. Most of it is now a hiking and biking and running trail.



Abandoned branch near Moraga became part of Oakland & Antioch electric.

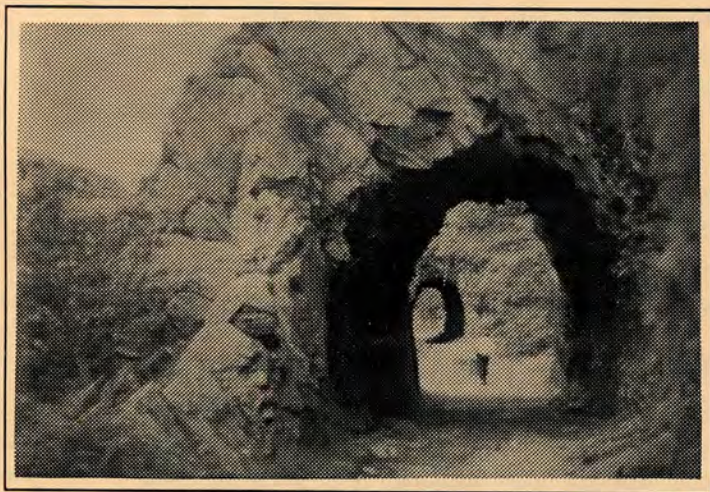


Ancient railroad crossing sign along Marsh Creek Road, ca. 1922

Up on Mt. Diablo hardly a trace is to be found, much of the trackbed having been eradicated by earth slides and subsequent erosion. After heavy rains in 1937 a portion of one of the quarry 0-4-0s was uncovered, lying where she had been deposited by the quake. She disappeared again in wartime scrap metal drives. A lot of the old Empire Railroad grade leading down into Antioch can be followed today, and it serves to stir up memories of what might have been had the narrow gauge

been better financed and been able to live on into these later years of heavy population and tourist-railroad nostalgia.

Now that highways from the San Francisco Bay Area to the state capitol at Sacramento are becoming clogged beyond hope, it would be a pleasure to be able to hop aboard a ferryboat at San Francisco for a ride across the bay. Then to enjoy a leisurely, relaxed scenic train journey through the hills and up the backside of Mount Diablo, old Devil Mountain itself. Then it would be down into Antioch and onto a swift river packet to complete the journey to old Sacramento.



Northwestern slopes of Mr. Hamilton; twin tunnels that never had tracks (1925)



Thirty years after abandonment a fill remains almost intact (1937)

### LOCOMOTIVE ROSTER

No.	Type	Builder
1	0-6-0 (?)	David Bell, Buffalo, 1871
2	4-6-0 (Ex-Nevada)	Baldwin Loco, Works, ?
3	0-4-0 (Quarry loco)	H.K. Porter (New 1900)
4	0-4-0 (Quarry loco)	H.K. Porter, (New c. 1900)
5	0-4-4	Porter Loco. Co. 1899 *
6	0-4-4	Porter Loco. Co. c. 1899*

(Leased from Empire Mine Co.: "Empire" and "Jenny Belshaw")

(\*) No.'s 5 and 6 sold to Mountain Copper Co., near Martinez

### FOOTNOTES

1. Ward, B. H., Mt. Diablo Coal Mine Railroads. San Mateo, *Western Railroader*, Bklt 370-E, N.D. (1971).
2. White, John H., American Locomotive Builders in the Steam Era. Washington, Bass, Inc., 1982.
3. McKellips, Dan. Lecture at California-Nevada R.R. Historical Society, at Oakland, September 2, 1938, in conjunction with William Pennington. (McKellips had assisted his father, a loco engineer for Empire R.R., and had occasionally operated Empire and Kennedy Mine locomotives. Pennington was loco engineer for W.P. and a railroad historian who had done research and photography on Mt. Diablo coal railroads.)
4. Bank of Stockton. Financial statement filed with bank by Kennedy Mining Company of Antioch, October 31, 1898.
5. Kennedy, Richard. Interview by author at Jacksonville, CA. Oct. 11, 1972.
6. Ibid.
7. Gusano, Teodoro, I. Reminiscences (unrecorded oral history).
8. Quinn, Denis. Information noted in small collection of Diablo Mine papers, May 1963, in "dead storage" area of Bancroft Library collections, Richmond, California.
9. Gusano, Teodoro, I. Ibid.



*"I wish I had written this book."*

--- Richard H. Dillon, author

*"Having known the author for many years I am not surprised that he has produced this thorough, capably written study. However, I am appalled that he does not credit John C. Fremont for initially envisioning this project."*

--- Ferol Egan, author

*This is the book I've wanted to read since I bought a copy of road's initial stock offering in David Magee's Book Shop in 1937."*

--- Basil Pearce, historian

*"I am relieved that this whole sordid story is now revealed, and I apologize for my participation in the attempted cover-up."*

--- R. deBretfield Hawley, athlete