



STILL CLIMBING TO THE JUNCTION

Quincy Railroad

ADAM WEIDENBACH/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

HIGH IN THE AMERICAN VALLEY of the Sierra Nevada is a very short short line railroad. For more than 100 years this tiny railroad has weathered changing times, changing markets, and changing ownerships. Today, the sole reason Quincy Railroad exists is for hauling lumber through beautiful meadows and forests from the huge Sierra Pacific Industries lumber mill in Quincy, Calif., to the junction with Union Pacific's Canyon Subdivision. The run from the big SPI mill to Quincy Junction is a scant 2.75 miles, but this little lumber hauler has one of the steepest grades in the west to contend with, and is packed with charm and personality. When I jokingly ask myself just how many ways can you shoot a

short line, Quincy Railroad keeps surprising me with the answer.

History

When Western Pacific built its famous line over the Sierra Nevada through the Feather River Canyon, it bypassed Quincy. To maintain its easy 1 percent grade, the line was built up along the side of Mount Hough about two miles north of Quincy, the seat of Plumas County. With only wagon roads that turned into a muddy mess in winter, the town felt it desperately needed a railroad to keep businesses from leaving. Promoters from San Francisco got wind of this and came to Quincy to convince locals to subscribe to building a new connecting railroad. Promoter J.J. Rutledge got \$55,000 in

contributions with the promise of matching those funds and building the railroad. Thus, on July 8, 1908, Quincy & Eastern Railroad was formed. However, it soon became clear that the promoters could not produce their share of the funding; Q&E was quickly dissolved and the big city promoters were run out of town.

The town fathers, including H. Flourney and Arthur Keddie (who surveyed WP's line over the Sierra Nevada), along with other prominent townsfolk, formed their own railroad, naming it Quincy & Western and incorporating it October 1, 1909. Q&W was built from its WP connection at Hartwell (milepost 228), later called Marston and renamed Quincy Junction in 1915, running steeply down along the lower flank of Mount Hough to



OPPOSITE: Quincy Railroad SW7 12 is in the hands of engineer/conductor Jesse as he and engineer/conductor Chris get the day started by pulling four empties from the storage spur on February 9, 2022.

LEFT TOP: On a foggy December 22, 2020, engineer/conductor Chris talks with the Portola Local crew near the east switch at Quincy Junction.

LEFT MIDDLE: Gliding through a pasture, with loads in tow, the 12 is about to cross Greenhorn Creek and face the "hill" on February 9, 2022.

LEFT BOTTOM: One of the nearly 300 log trucks per day enters the big SPI mill on May 12, 2022. The loading crew is busy tying down the cables on the last few lumber loads before the railroaders start up the locomotive for the day.



the valley floor, where it crossed Greenhorn Creek and then ran across a beautiful mountain meadow on a slight uphill grade to East Quincy. It then turned westward and ran along Lee Road and into Quincy. The grade down the "hill" starts at 3 percent, then runs for about 1.5 miles on grades up to 4 percent. Nearing the bottom of the hill, the line runs through a cut and S-curve near Pine Oak Road. In the cut, a short drop reaching more than 5 percent is found.

The "Quick & Windy," as it soon became known, was 5.38 miles long and had its depot and engine facilities near downtown. Construction began in April 1910 with 50-pound relay rail as old as 1875, salvaged from Southern Pacific's line from Red Bluff to Woodland, Calif. At 11:30AM on June 2, 1910, railroad Vice President L.N. Peter drove the final spike. After speeches by Peter and Keddie, free rides were offered to the public. By late fall, the railroad was completed with ballast, a depot, and a single-stall enginehouse for a cost of \$72,000. Quincy & Western's only locomotive was a 37-ton, 0-4-4T Forney-type built by American Locomotive Co. in December 1909 and numbered 1.

Hauling a modest amount of passengers and general freight, Q&W wasn't exactly a financial success in the early years. By mid-1917, the railroad's major stockholders had reached the end of their rope and advised local stockholders that the pike was all but finished. At this point, freight consisted of outbound shipments from one local lumber mill and a few inbound loads per month including less-than-carload freight, fuel, and general commodities. On September 17, Q&W filed with the State Railroad Commission for abandonment.

Objections from townsfolk and Quincy Lumber Co. came almost immediately. By mid-October, F.S. Murphy and James Ingebrizten of Quincy Lumber came to an agreement with the Q&W stockholders to buy the railroad. Articles of incorporation



were filed on November 10, 1917, and the railroad was reorganized as Quincy Railroad. Shortly after, the lumber company was renamed the F.S. Murphy Lumber Co. To cut costs, the new owners purchased a gasoline-powered railway motorcar to carry passengers, baggage, and express. The "Galloping Goose," as it was nicknamed, arrived in March 1918. The stinky new contraption weighed seven tons and could haul 25 passengers.

Sharing the track with the daily freight train proved to be risky business a few years later, when the train crew decided they could make a run for the junction before the Quincy-bound "downhill" motorcar departed. Of course, they failed to call in with their intentions and a "cornfield" meet occurred just as the Goose came out of the trees at the bottom of the hill near Chandler Road. Both crews "joined the birds," leaving the lone passenger to fend

RIGHT: QRR 12 and crew are back at the shop for lunch on February 9, 2022. If loads are ready to go, they'll start up again and make a second run up to the junction. If not, the crew may work on the track replacing ties.

BELOW: On the beautiful, sub-freezing, winter morning of February 10, 2022, the QRR crew pulls cars out of the siding to dig out one bad order car.

for herself. Thankfully, the train crew dynamited the train's brakes and the collision was at a slow speed, with the passenger sustaining only minor injuries.

The Murphy interests added a second locomotive in 1924 in anticipation of a sharp increase in traffic, due to Feather River Power Co. commencing the Bucks Creek Hydroelectric Project west of Quincy. Built by Alco in December 1924,

2-6-2T Number 2 weighed in at just under 60 tons. Between 1925 and 1928, QRR had a huge boost in revenue hauling inbound loads of construction supplies and heavy equipment for use on the dam project, including a Marion steam shovel weighing 221,000 pounds.

The year 1926 brought another ownership change when Murphy sold its lumber mills at Quincy and Sloat, Calif., to a



ABOVE: Chris watches with a fire extinguisher, as Jesse cuts a section of rail for the siding switch on June 28, 2022.

BELOW LEFT: QRR 12 glides back across the meadows to the mill after running to the junction with loads on February 9, 2022.



group of lumbermen from Lake Charles, La. The lumber company was again named Quincy Lumber Co. and steadily increased production over the next few years. In the late 1920s, the Galloping Goose broke its driveshaft and the railroad resumed mixed train service.

The Great Depression had a terrible impact on the industry and from 1930 to 1936, Quincy Lumber Co. was shut down. With business nearly nonexistent, Quincy Railroad Superintendent Leonard L.

Thayer petitioned the SRC in 1932 to substitute motor service for passenger, express, and LCL shipments. Thayer later drafted, but never sent, a petition to abandon the railroad. Several personal loans backed by officials of the railroad carried the load until Quincy Lumber Company reopened in November 1936.

Both passenger and (especially) freight traffic skyrocketed during World War II. Prewar freight shipments didn't exceed 500 cars per year, but in 1942 2,152 cars

were shipped over the line. Additional lumber producers sprang up along the route, including four sawmills and three millwork and moldings companies. Meadow Valley Lumber moved its sawmill operations from Spanish Ranch to East Quincy between 1941 and 1942. During its peak years between 1942 and 1946, Quincy Railroad had 16 employees plus the superintendent on the payroll.

This massive increase in traffic was too much for the two steam locomotives, and the railroad desperately needed more motive power. A few used steamers were considered for purchase, but diesel power was showing great advantages in fuel and labor savings. After a mountain of telegrams and letters pleading with the American Shortline Railroad Association and the War Production Board over most of 1944, the railroad was finally granted permission to purchase locomotive 3, a 44-ton General Electric center-cab diesel. Based on reduced fuel costs alone, it paid for itself in about 10 years.

Number 2 was retained as backup power into the late 1960s, and was eventually retired and sold off in 1970. Currently restored at Niles Canyon Railway in Sunol, Calif., the engine is sidelined awaiting its federally mandated rebuild.

Lumber mills along the line dropped off in the postwar years, and in 1955 Quincy Lumber Co. closed its mills in Quincy and Sloat. This left the Meadow

RIGHT: QRR SW1200 5 brings a cut of 12 empties off the hill on December 22, 2020. The end of the train is negotiating the steepest part of the line.

RIGHT BOTTOM: The 12 gets the luxury of a roof over its head. The engine shop and railroad office are actually part of a huge lumber storage shed at the SPI mill. The 12 is nestled inside on May 14, 2022.

Valley mill in East Quincy. Meadow Valley was acquired by Dant Timber (owner of Feather River Lumber Co.) in 1962, then DiGeorgio Corp., and finally Sierra Pacific Industries in 1976. Mixed train service ended in the 1950s. The local petroleum distributor switched to truck hauling in the 1960s. By the end of the decade, the only thing keeping the rust off the rails between East Quincy and downtown was the 3 running light to and from the enginehouse. Between 1969 and 1970, the railroad abandoned and removed 2.5 miles of trackage into downtown and built a new enginehouse at the end of track in East Quincy.

In 1973, the 3 was scheduled for a two-month overhaul. QRR had borrowed 44-tonners from WP subsidiary Sacramento Northern in the past, but by this time the smallest power left on the SN roster was Alco S-1 405. Superintendent Myers was impressed with 405's performance, and railcars were becoming heavier and heavier, so he made an offer on the unit. Built in April 1942, 405 was WP's first Alco switcher (numbered 504). Arriving on April 9, 1973, QRR 5 served the railroad well until it was retired and donated to the museum in Portola in 1997, along with QRR 3.

The primary power is EMD SW1200 5 (s/n 28344), built in June 1963 as Ashley Drew & Northern 178. It was later transferred to Amador Central (both owned by Georgia-Pacific) where it was renumbered 11 in 1995. When the mills closed in 1997, the locomotive was transferred to Quincy, where it became 5.

Built in March 1950, EMD SW7 12 (s/n 11232) is currently the backup engine. Built for Arkansas & Louisiana Missouri, it also worked Chattahoochee Industrial as 11 and Amador Central as 12. The locomotive was transferred to SPI's operation in Susanville in 1997, and then to Quincy in 2005.

Current Operations

Today's QRR is about 2.75 miles long, not including two spurs and the siding. During the last decade, the railroad moved between 617 and 1,151 cars per year, reflecting the wide swings of the lumber market. These days the crew consists of two members who are both engineers and conductors, as well as the maintenance-of-way workforce. Chris, a fourth-generation employee, has worked



on QRR for 20 years. Jesse has been with SPI since 2011 and at the throttle since 2017, having worked for the Union Pacific maintenance-of-way department as well. Working Monday-Friday, the railroad hauls varying quantities of lumber loads to the junction depending on orders and market demand. In 2021, the railroad averaged 95 cars per month. UP's Portola Local used to run to Quincy Junction three times a week, but currently comes twice a week on Tuesdays and Fridays; these are the best days to visit the railroad and see the most action.

On the trip up the hill, the train is limited to four loaded centerbeam cars at a time, and even at four cars, this is a "run 8" situation for the last mile or so up the side of the mountain to the junction. With frost or snow on the rails in the winter months this can be a tricky proposition on the steep ruling grade and sharp curves.

The crew comes on duty when the mill needs them, which varies between 6:00 and 9:00AM, depending largely on what the forklift/loading crew accomplished the evening before. The mill loading track has capacity for only four centerbeams, so it demands to be switched often.

After warming up the locomotive, the crew will pull the four loads out to the spur near Mill Creek Road, then shove back and tie on to four empties. They will then shove the whole train back to the mill and leave the four empties to be loaded, while they haul the loads across the valley and up the hill to Quincy Junction. At the junction, the crew eases the train to within 15 feet of the end of the tail track to clear the switch into the south siding. The north siding switch allows only enough room for three cars on the tail track, so the crew will shove four cars into the south siding and on the next two trips, they will shove one car into the south siding and three cars into the north siding for a total of 12 cars, six per track. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, they will return "light engine" to switch the mill with cars stored in the siding in the valley near East Quincy and "the spur." The spur can handle eight cars and the company ballast car, and the siding has just enough room for 12 cars if the slack is bunched by tying down the end of the train and giving it a shove — all part of the job on this efficient little backwoods railroad.

LEFT TOP: QRR 5 eases 12 empties down "the hill" from the junction on May 13, 2022.

LEFT: With Union Pacific's Chandler Creek Trestle in the background, QRR 12 heads back to the mill light after its morning run up to Quincy Junction on February 9, 2022.



ABOVE: EMD SW7 12 cools its heels after a day's work on February 8, 2022. In the morning, the cars to its right will be loaded and ready to head up to the junction.

RIGHT: On the sunny and frigid morning of February 10, 2022, the crew has pulled four more empties from the siding and is making a shove toward the hungry lumber mill.



Usually, but not always, the loading crew will be almost finished loading the four cars left for them in the morning. Often, Chris and Jesse will assist in securing the tie-down cables on the loads. Once secure, the crew will usually pull the loads and grab another cut of empties to shove into the mill. At this point, they'll usually take lunch.

Most days, the crew will head out on the line with their hi-rail pickup and perform maintenance-of-way chores, which can account for about 80 percent of their work throughout the year. Jesse runs a rented backhoe when needed for pulling and inserting ties, and for bringing in scoops of new ballast to be tamped by hand with an air-powered tamping bar. Spikes are also driven with an air hammer. Both crewmen can trade almost all duties maintaining the railroad and are replacing about 800 ties per year. They do a fantastic job keeping the railroad in good shape. Rail is mostly 75-pound and some dates back to the 1890s. After a morning of trackwork, the crew will often take a cut of loads up the hill.

Tuesdays and Fridays are a different animal. On these days, the crew

will finish off "stuffing" the yard at the junction, contact Union Pacific, and coordinate with the Portola Local (LS60) to make a meet. Depending on orders, the Local may just take the 12 loads and give QRR empties, or the crew might bring more loads to the meet. (This could be four more or sometimes eight more.) QRR will pull the extra loads up and into the tail track, and shove them onto the end of the string of 12 already attached to the Local. If eight extra loads need to be taken up, the crew will grab all eight in Quincy and haul them down to the base of the hill, leaving four on the main between the crossings at Chandler Road and Carol Lane. Each string of four will

be muscled up the grade and then shoved onto the end of the Local. When all loads have been handed over to the LS60, it will shove the loads west down the UP main while pulling empties facing east, and clear the west switch at the junction. Meanwhile, the QRR crew will drift down the hill far enough to have the Local shove empties down to them onto the QRR main, clearing the QRR main line switch. This can be anywhere from 12 to 20 cars. At times, the Local may have to come twice on Tuesdays, Fridays, or both to give QRR enough cars to fill orders, but this is rare. During 2020 and 2021, Quincy Railroad set new production records, and 2022 looked like it might break even



those records as well — in March 2022, the railroad shipped 156 loaded cars. With an interchange that holds only 13 cars, that is tricky business. If more than 12 empties are to be hauled back to town, the train will stop at the north switch of the siding near East Quincy and take a cut (usually four cars) and run around them so they can be shoved into the ballast car spur or be used to switch the mill if loads are ready. The remaining 12 are then pulled into the siding and tied down. This is the dance that the capable crew performs day in and day out. It takes some creativity to keep the loads of lumber moving, but I'm sure it's par for the course to Chris and Jesse.

The Future

As housing starts drop off and construction slows a bit, QRR may stop breaking records. Time will tell what is in store for the ever-changing lumber market. The

timberland base where SPI harvests its timber is also a consideration in light of the numerous, catastrophic fires California has seen in the last few years.

The railroad remains the most cost-effective way to transport lumber products from Quincy's big SPI lumber mill, and rising fuel prices will only bolster this.

One consideration on the horizon is the replacement of the aging motive power. Not only are the two, classic, endcab switchers getting old (72 and 59 years), but future requirements for "greener" locomotives will dictate their replacement. The company is saving for the cost of new locomotive technology, but "what" technology has not yet been decided. Tier 4 engine conversions are one consideration, and battery-powered units have also been considered. One way or another, if you want to see six- and seven-decades-old EMD switchers fighting their way up brutally steep grades through spectacular scenery, you might want to do it sooner rather than later. Time marches on, and there will be changes, but Quincy Railroad will still have a lot of personality packed into a small and short package. 📍



TOP LEFT: The Quincy crew has just had four empties handed off to them on the "hill" and is rolling down an approximately 3 percent grade on November 16, 2022.

LEFT: Below snow-dusted peaks, QRR 12 heads across the meadows, with four empties, at milepost 1 on the crisp and crystal clear fall morning of November 16, 2022.

BELOW: Just as the sun rises, SW7 12 is pulling empties out of the siding on February 10, 2022. So begins another beautiful day on northern California's Quincy Railroad.

