

THIS BNSF BRANCHLINE
IS FROZEN IN TIME,
SURROUNDED BY PROGRESS

Pasadena Local

TIME TRAVEL IS TYPICALLY THE DOMAIN of popular fiction like “Star Trek” or “Dr. Who,” but stand trackside in the city of Glendora, nestled in Southern California’s San Gabriel Valley, and you’ll find a nine-mile segment of preserved Santa Fe history that stubbornly clings to a vestige of late 1990s railroading.

This is the home of BNSF’s Pasadena Sub Local, which travels five days a week from Fontana to the MillerCoors brewery in Irwindale. It’s a remnant of the Pasadena Subdivision, Santa Fe’s hotshot freight and passenger route between San Bernardino and Los Angeles, originally known as the Second District. In 1994, Santa Fe sold the line to the Southern California Regional Rail Authority and much of the route was transformed into commuter corridors — the west end from Los Angeles to Azusa is Metro Los Angeles’ light rail Gold Line, while the east end hosts heavy

rail Metrolink commuter trains between San Bernardino and Pomona (the latter trains continue to L.A. via old Pacific Electric and Southern Pacific routes).

The central segment of the Pasadena Sub is all that remains to preserve the Santa Fe legacy. And what a sight it is! The local itself is a throwback to the late-1990s with its everyday use of former Santa Fe GP60Ms and GP60s. But between Pomona and Azusa, something magical happens. Jointed rail, vintage signals, and quaint pole lines serve as an amazing time capsule, virtually untouched from the day that Santa Fe merged with Burlington Northern more than 20 years ago.

Yet nothing lasts forever, and Metro LA is eager to expand its popular Gold Line to Montclair, while the Pasadena Sub local will continue, its unique trackside character will be erased forever. Let’s visit this time-warped before the inevitable march of progress catches up with it.

ELROND LAWRENCE/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

TIME IN A BOTTLE: BNSF GP60Ms in Santa Fe “Warbonnet” dress lead the westbound Pasadena Sub Local over Route 66 in Azusa, Calif., on February 18, 2013, as construction on L.A. Metro’s Gold Line light rail extension begins alongside the freight line.



Passengers for Pasadena

The Second District was completed in two phases by Santa Fe affiliates. The Los Angeles & San Gabriel Valley completed the line between L.A. and Pasadena on September 11, 1885; nearly two years later, the San Bernardino & Los Angeles completed the corridor when it built west from San Bernardino and reached the LA&SGV at Mud Springs (near San Dimas) in May 1887. The first run of the extra-fare *Chief* in November 1926 was followed by the *Super Chief* in 1936. Streamlined trainsets would follow, introducing Santa Fe's iconic warbonnet colors, and soon the Second District became a SoCal passenger racetrack, with *El Capitans*, *Grand Canyons*, and other trains added to the illustrious passenger fleet.

Southern Californians from all walks of life rode the Second District between Los Angeles and San Bernardino, with Hollywood celebrities detraining at Pasadena to avoid the paparazzi at Union Station. When Santa Fe handed its passenger service to Amtrak in 1971, fast freights joined the daily *Desert Wind* and *Southwest Limited* trains through the 1970s and '80s. Westbound freights typically used the Second District, while eastbounds traveled the Third District via Fullerton and Riverside. By 1994, when Santa Fe unceremoniously closed the Pasadena Subdivision and sold it to L.A.'s Metro commuter agency, only one passenger train remained, the renamed *Southwest Chief*, which made its last stop in Pasadena on January 30.

Years before that sad day, railfans were treated to an unbelievable surprise. In 1989, the railroad used its historic Pasadena station in a filming sequence for a new marketing video designed to evoke the high service standards of the old *Super Chief*. Ex-Santa Fe F7s Nos. 347C and B, owned by the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento, were posed by the depot with a stainless steel train of AT&SF business cars. As the cameras rolled, a short intermodal freight roared past powered by blue-and-yellow GP60s — but onlookers knew who the real stars were. Little did fans know at the time that this was an early step toward the modern "Super Fleet," which would bring back Santa Fe's famous red-and-silver warbonnet colors.

By 2003, Metro Los Angeles had completed its transformation of the western end of the Pasadena Sub into the new light rail Gold Line. The Pasadena depot survives as a restaurant surrounded by high-rise condos, but now light rail trains stop instead of streamliners. Everything east of Pasadena was left in its mid-1990s appearance, though precious few trains ran beyond the MillerCoors brewery in Irwindale. Those that did were empty "baretable" intermodal cars for storage, and the annual BNSF Christmas train for children at the City of Hope cancer center in Duarte.

Construction began in summer 2011 on the 11.5-mile Gold Line extension from Pasadena to Azusa and was



completed in September 2015. On March 5, 2016, after extensive testing, Metro's "Foothill Extension" was opened with great fanfare and heavy ridership.

West of Irwindale, all AT&SF rail was removed and little trace of the Second District remains. East of the brewery, the active BNSF line was shifted to the south and rebuilt to make way for the double-track light rail corridor. When the Gold Line continues its expansion east, the same fate will befall the remaining nine miles of vintage Santa Fe trackage from Azusa to Pomona.

OPPOSITE: Face of the future: An L.A. Metro Gold Line test train rolls east out of downtown Azusa, Calif., on February 28, 2016. The Santa Fe depot and relocated BNSF line can be seen at right. **TOP:** In the Second District's passenger heyday, the *Chief* thunders past the Glendora, Calif., depot in 1939. **RALPH MELCHING/LOS ANGELES RAILROAD HERITAGE FOUNDATION** **ABOVE:** The image of Santa Fe's *Super Chief* returned to Pasadena one last time in February 1989, posing for film crews beside the large downtown depot which today is surrounded by high-rise towers.



OPPOSITE: The Kaiser Hauler switches in BNSF's Kaiser Yard near Fontana, Calif., on November 26, 2010. The Hauler ferries traffic between Kaiser and the classification yard in Barstow. **TOP:** Warbonnet GP60M No. 149, still wearing full "Santa Fe" lettering, leads the eastbound local through downtown Glendora, Calif., on February 18, 2013. **ABOVE:** Three GP60Ms power a westbound local past a renovated fruit packing house in La Verne, Calif., on May 7, 2010.

Make Way for Freight

The Pasadena Sub Local is based out of BNSF's Kaiser Yard, just outside the former steel mill town of Fontana, 45 miles east of L.A. Between assignments, a fleet of GP60Ms and GP80s can be seen from the Cherry Avenue overpass that also offers a view of Auto Club Speedway, the NASCAR racetrack that largely replaced the once-sprawling Kaiser Steel mill.

The local typically goes on duty at 9:00 a.m., building its train in the yard before going west to Rancho Cucamonga. The train departs CP Archibald around 10:30 a.m. and switches a small yard in Pomona, adjacent to Metrolink's Pomona station stop between Garey Avenue and Fulton Road. West of here, the time machine begins and it's 1994 all over again. Occasionally the local meanders up the Metropolitan Water District spur in La Verne.

The crew often stops for lunch in San Dimas or Glendora, arriving at the MillerCoors Brewery in Irwindale between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m.; arrivals can be earlier or later, depending on how much switching is needed in Pomona. Between Azusa and Irwindale, the local rides a new line that parallels the Foothill Extension of Metro L.A.'s Gold Line. The local usually departs the brewery around 3:30 p.m. and heads home to Kaiser Yard, although on a longer day it's not uncommon for a crew to stop in San Dimas and catch dinner.

The local passes four original Santa Fe stations on its journey: the downtown Azusa depot is unused, awaiting restoration, while the San Dimas depot is owned and operated as a museum by the Pacific Railroad Society. The Upland depot is a wine-and-cigar bar while the beautiful Claremont station serves Metrolink passengers. A sister station to Claremont stands in Monrovia beside the Gold Line, awaiting restoration.

Pasadena Local

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2016 White River Productions





Signals from a Survivor

Of the nine miles between Pomona and Azusa, one photo opportunity towers above the rest: signal 1132, the last original Santa Fe cantilever in California. Topped by an R-2 color light, the graceful Union Switch & Signal Co. structure stands beside the Pasadena Avenue grade crossing in Glendora — and amazingly it's still operational. Locals operate via track warrant, but the line maintains its automatic block signaling. That's why the passage of BNSF 160 West on a gorgeous December 2015 afternoon triggers the red aspect on cantilever 1132, which guards the unused east end of the Glendora siding.

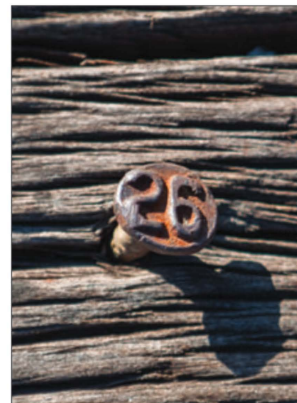
The GP60/GP60M combo — complete with a red ex-Santa Fe caboose, or “shoving platform” — has left the rest of

its train in Pomona and is bound for the MillerCoors brewery in Irwindale. Aside from the Metrolink milepost 114 marker and a pair of “no trespassing” signs, everything else in the scene is pure Santa Fe. A close inspection of the tie plates reveals cast “Santa Fe” lettering, and date nails can be found on almost every tie. Walk beside the tracks and trace the history of this line by nails that reflect the decades, from the 1960s to the 1930s and even a few scattered survivors from the '20s. At one point the photographer is stopped cold by a date nail that reads “26” . . . the year that witnessed the birth of Santa Fe's *Chief* and the commissioning of nearby Route 66.

Need relief from high-tech GEs and modern mainlines? Plan a lunch break

around a visit to Glendora, or better yet, take the day off. Stand under cantilever 1132 on a winter's afternoon, soak up the Southern California sunshine, and wait for a headlight.

ABOVE: Resembling an old “cab hop” from the 1980s, the Pasadena Sub Local light engines and caboose lights up the cantilever signal at Glendora on December 18, 2015. OPPOSITE: Detail views in 2009 reveal the bones of the Second District, from the R-2 color light head to “Santa Fe” tie plates and a 1926 date nail.



A New Beginning and The End

Time has stood still for this railroad in the San Gabriel Valley, but it's about to get rolling again. By the time you read this, L.A. voters will have approved or rejected Measure M, a half-cent sales tax that would fund a second extension of Metro's Gold Line 12.3 miles through Glendora, San Dimas, La Verne, Pomona, Claremont, and Montclair. Construction could begin as early as 2019, with completion around 2025. A few years remain for fans to enjoy the Pasadena Sub experience.

As for the local itself, the red-and-silver image is already beginning to disappear. The GP60M fleet that largely wears warbonnet colors 20 years after the BNSF merger has entered a rebuilding program at MPI in Idaho, emerging as

GP60M-3s in shiny new BNSF orange-and-black. While the livery looks sharp, the program signals the end of another Santa Fe chapter, although blue-and-yellow GP60s are beginning to appear more frequently on locals. Don't count out the Santa Fe just yet.

Even as the locomotive colors change, it's still a thrill to photograph trains on a right-of-way that hasn't changed since 1994. During the winter months when the sun sets early and the local returns home in twilight, it's possible to imagine the *Super Chief* — or even the Super Fleet — speeding past 50-year-old US&S color light signals. At times the evening trips take on a surreal quality, such as in early 2013 when the local was allowed to roll by signal 1092 in San Dimas,

displaying a constant red after thieves stole copper wires from the old pole line. Speaking of twilight, let's stand trackside in downtown Azusa on a warm evening in October 2016, where a once-quiet rail line has become a light rail hot spot. Metro's classic P2550 trainsets and new P3010 trains streak in and out of the stylish station platform, rising over Route 66 as they journey to and from Los Angeles. Commuters stream across the platforms and scatter to their cars, spared the pain of driving the torturous 210 freeway. Next to the station is the relocated BNSF line and the Santa Fe depot, reminders of the last great era for the old Second District.

The new era looks to be equally exciting. ☐

