



## NEW LIFE FOR THE PLACERVILLE BRANCH

# PLACERVILLE & SACRAMENTO VALLEY

MIKE ROQUE/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR EXCEPT AS NOTED

**I**N THE 1850s, CALIFORNIA WAS IN THE midst of the Gold Rush, and getting mail and supplies to the remote population was a major undertaking. Everything had to take a months-long journey through deserts and over the Rockies and Sierra Nevada or go south by sea through the Isthmus of Panama. Both propositions were long and dangerous.

In early 1852, a group of businessmen saw the opportunity to build fast, reliable transportation from Sacramento to the mining communities, so they incorporated the Sacramento, Auburn & Nevada Railroad. Alas, their plans fell

apart when the first section of track they were planning to lay was going to cost more than \$2 million. However, retired U.S. Army Col. Charles Lincoln Wilson also saw the opportunity for a railroad to serve the area, so he reorganized the abandoned railroad company and formed the Sacramento Valley Railroad on August 16, 1852, the first railroad west of the Mississippi River. Construction began in Sacramento in February 1855, the line reached Folsom in January of 1856, and the inaugural run took place on February 22.

Meanwhile, the people of the Sierra Nevada foothills town of Placerville

(PLASS-er-vill), a hub for the region's mining operations, wanted rail service to carry heavy freight destined for the silver mines in the Comstock Lode in Nevada, so the first railroad to be named Placerville & Sacramento Valley Railroad was incorporated on June 12, 1862, and construction from Folsom Junction towards Placerville began in late 1863. The line reached Latrobe in August 1864 and Shingle Springs in June 1865, but the railroad was unable to secure additional financing to continue construction to Placerville and was on the verge of bankruptcy. On April 19, 1877, the Sacramento &

Placerville Railroad was incorporated to purchase the Placerville & Sacramento Valley Railroad. The line subsequently reached Placerville on March 29, 1888, the first passenger train arrived on April 9, and the first freight reached the depot a few days later on April 18.

**(Almost) A Century of Southern Pacific**  
On May 15, 1888, the railroad became part of the Southern Pacific under its non-operating subsidiary, the Northern Railway, in 1888, and then ten years later under the SP on April 14, 1898.

The primary sources of traffic on what became the SP's Placerville Branch were timber from the El Dorado National Forest and locally grown fruit. Timber was hauled to Placerville over 65 miles of logging railroads including California Door Company's narrow gauge Diamond & Caldor Railway and Michigan California Lumber Company's eight-

mile standard gauge Camino, Placerville & Lake Tahoe Railroad, both of which were formed in 1904. Fruit grown in surrounding areas was packed and loaded in Placerville.

When the Michigan California Lumber Company closed its mill at Camino in 1986, CP&LT operations ended between Camino and Placerville that June, scrapping of the track began on September 3, and it was complete by December. With the primary reason for the branch's existence gone, SP operations between Folsom and Placerville ended in 1987, just one year shy of the line's 100th anniversary.

### Inactive, Not Abandoned

Many years of inactivity and neglect followed, causing the line to fall into disrepair, including overgrown brush and trees, significant flooding, and several washouts. But, importantly, the

line was never abandoned.

On October 1, 1991, the Sacramento-Placerville Transportation Corridor Joint Powers Authority (SPTC-JPA), made up of the City of Folsom, the County of El Dorado, the County of Sacramento, and Sacramento Regional Transit (RT), was formed for the purpose of acquiring and preserving the Placerville Branch Rail Corridor between Sacramento and Diamond Springs as a rail-banked corridor under the Rails to Trails Act. SPTC-JPA successfully negotiated an agreement with Southern Pacific, and a Notice of Interim Trail Use was subsequently issued by the Surface Transportation Board on July 27, 1995.

Earlier that year, on April 17, the Folsom, El Dorado & Sacramento Historical Railroad Association (FEDSHRA) incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization and went on to establish the Folsom Railroad Museum at the depot in historic downtown Folsom in 1998. In 1999, the group restored the city's historic gallows-style turntable that was built in 1856, and in 2002 it returned the Weyerhaeuser Skagit-built motor car to operation.

During this same period, as the Sacramento region's population grew and its light rail service proved popular, RT extended what would come to be called the Gold Line eastward from downtown Sacramento, reaching Mather Field in September 1998, Sunrise Station in June 2004, and finally Folsom on October 15, 2005, echoing the line's original eastward expansion over a century earlier.

### The New Placerville & Sacramento Valley

In January, 2008, SPTC-JPA issued a Request for Proposals to operate excursion rail service on the line between Folsom and Diamond Springs. FEDSHRA submitted a proposal, was



**ABOVE:** Sacramento Regional Transit's Gold Line light rail, built on the original Placerville Branch right-of-way, reached Folsom on October 15, 2005. On September 18, 2010, a light rail train with mixed paint schemes heads for downtown Sacramento just after departing the Gold Line terminal at Folsom. **RIGHT:** The Placerville Branch primarily hauled citrus and forest products, but the line also carried limestone. Southern Pacific GP9 No. 3899 leads a short train of limestone hoppers eastward past the double crossing of South Shingle Road at Brella, just east of Latrobe, on June 17, 1976. VIC NEVES PHOTO

**OPPOSITE:** Dozens of swallows that nest under the U.S. Highway 50 overpass swarm vociferously as the first P&SVRR train of the day departs Hampton Station in Folsom on May 15, 2016.



selected as the excursion railroad operator in May, and incorporated a new Placerville & Sacramento Valley Railroad as a separate non-profit corporation to operate the railroad on August 8. Later that year, the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento donated Howard Terminal Whitcomb diesel No. 8 and four former U.S. Air Force flat cars. P&SVRR began converting one of the flats for passenger use in 2009. The Fernley Preservation Society of Fernley, Nev., donated Cotton Belt bay window caboose No. 48 in July 2013.

The track was mostly intact, but a number of areas needed to be repaired and/or cleared of obstructions to be safe for even motor car operations. Many mature trees that had grown close to (and in several cases between) the rails were removed. Bridges were inspected

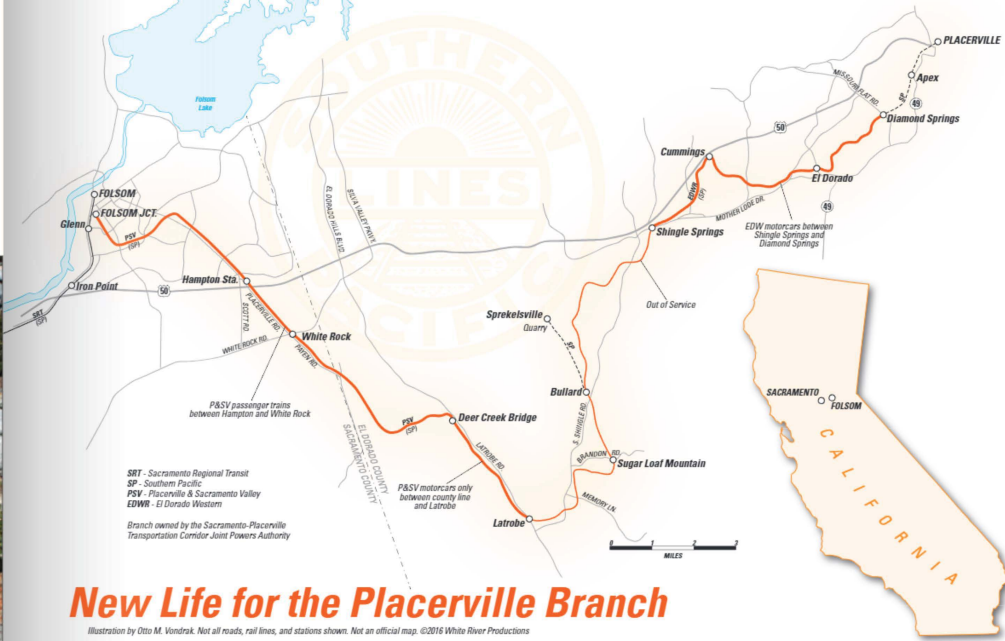
**RIGHT:** P&SVRR's first annual Railfest was held on September 18-19, 2010, and featured many different pieces of operating rail equipment, including a handcar, various motor cars, and a streetcar provided by RT Metro. **BELOW:** Diesel train rides began on August 3, 2013, with Howard Terminal No. 8 and a converted flatcar providing a short half-mile jaunt from Folsom Junction to Glenn Drive. Cotton Belt caboose No. 48 was not yet ready for service and was on static display.

and repaired. Many ties were replaced, a few broken rails were changed out, and a major washout near Latrobe was repaired. It would be a few more years before the track would be brought up to Class 1 standards to allow trains to run, but the line was safe for motor cars.

The City of Folsom had expanded significantly in the 20-plus years since SP trains stopped running, and new suburban neighborhoods were built all around the line on the east side of town. Many new

multi-lane roads were added without warning lights or gates at crossings, so three-person flagging crews were required to provide protection and ensure safe train movements through town.

Despite all the challenges, the first annual Folsom Railfest was held at Hampton Station in 2010, which featured a handcar derby, motor car rides, and even Sacramento Regional Transit's historic street car No. 129 operating via a portable on-rail generator. Public



## New Life for the Placerville Branch

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

motor car rides in Folsom began the next year and were extended to Latrobe in July 2011, bringing the first passenger trains there since 1957.

In November 2012, SPTC-JPA granted P&SVRR a five-year license to operate trains between Folsom and the El Dorado County line, and public train rides began the following June. P&SVRR continued restoring track to Class 1 standards, and installed modern crossing gates and flashing lights at White Rock Road crossing in September. In 2014, the Cotton Belt caboose was restored to operational condition, and the first public train rides between Hampton Station and White Rock ran on September 13. The first full season of regularly scheduled train rides was in 2015, and on October 15, the railroad operated a special train for the Southern Pacific Historical & Technical Society's annual convention. In 2016, ridership continues to grow, and P&SVRR operated its first wine train on May 15 in partnership with Nello Olivo Wines, an El Dorado County winery located in Placerville, for a sold-out crowd.

### Trains to Latrobe and Beyond?

P&SVRR's vision is for world-class rail excursions on the entirety of the historic and scenic Placerville Branch. The railroad currently operates on 8.4 miles of track in Sacramento County

between Folsom Junction (milepost 111) and the El Dorado County line (milepost 119.4), but most of it is in congested urban areas of Folsom where exceptional track conditions and the railroad's operating license terms prohibit carrying passengers, so public train rides only run on a 1.6-mile section between Hampton Station (milepost 116.38) and White Rock (milepost 118) where Class 1 standards, and El Dorado County allows only motor cars to operate on the seven miles from the county line to Latrobe (milepost 126.4).

The El Dorado County Historical Museum operates its own motor cars over 8.5 miles of track between Shingle Springs station (milepost 137) and the end of track at Missouri Flat Road in the town of El Dorado (milepost 145.5) as the El Dorado Western Railroad (EDWR), but neither EDWR nor P&SVRR equipment is allowed to carry passengers on the 10.6 miles between Latrobe and Shingle Springs, which happens to be the location of some of the most spectacular vistas on the entire line.

Because the tracks are part of a multi-use corridor that includes trails, excursion rail operations on the Placerville Branch in El Dorado County have been controversial. Some trail advocates favor exclusive use of the corridor for hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians, and some county residents

categorically object to the operation of any railroad equipment whatsoever. On March 28, 2011, the county approved what became known as the "Shingle Springs Compromise Plan," which called for the complete removal of the rails between Shingle Springs and the county line to fund construction of a trail on the roadbed, but still allowed EDWR to operate excursions between Shingle Springs and El Dorado. Fortunately, SPTC-JPA has unequivocally stipulated that the rails must remain in place.

P&SVRR's next goal is to restore an additional 1.4 miles of track to Class 1 standards to allow trains to run past White Rock all the way to the El Dorado County line, almost doubling the current run's length. Once that is complete, the next step is to extend Class 1 track into El Dorado County to allow trains to run all the way to Latrobe and eventually Shingle Springs.

However, on May 10, 2016, a special meeting of the Board of Supervisors of El Dorado County was held to decide whether to even continue allowing P&SVRR to run motor cars to Latrobe in 2016 as they have done for the previous five years. Thankfully, after many hours of passionate testimony by corridor stakeholders and occasionally contentious public comments by various interest groups, the board voted unanimously to allow P&SVRR to continue operating



ABOVE: Just moments after ducking under the U.S. 50 overpass, the P&SVRR train leaves Folsom's suburbs behind and immediately enters the wide open rolling hills of the city's completely undeveloped southeast corner as it climbs the steep grade eastward toward White Rock. RIGHT: In July 2011, P&SVRR began operating a ten-mile motor car run on selected Saturday mornings from Folsom to Latrobe, where passengers enjoy a pancake breakfast at Latrobe Elementary School. On February 28, 2016, President Jim Harville and flagman Jack Henry (behind Jim's flag) stop traffic on Latrobe Road for Skagit motor car No. 30.



motor car excursions to Latrobe in 2016. But, only motor cars are permitted; operating trains or even upgrading any track to Class 1 standards in that section remains expressly forbidden.

However, the county also designated the Administrator of the El Dorado County Historical Museum (operator of El Dorado Western Railroad) as the manager of railroad operations on the line in El Dorado County, including oversight of the operation, maintenance, and preservation of the railroad, a task which had previously been handled by the county's Parks and Recreation Division supervisor. This change is expected to help streamline day-to-

day rail operations on this segment of the corridor and foster additional collaboration between P&SVRR and EDWR to continue developing and expanding rail operations on the line.

P&SVRR's current operating license expires in February 2018, a few months before its tenth anniversary. Hopefully, a new agreement can be reached with El Dorado County and SPTC-JPA by then that will allow both rails and trails to coexist on the entirety of the corridor.

#### Riding and Photographing the Line

The railroad's regular motive power is Howard Terminal No. 8, a Whitcomb (then part of Baldwin Locomotive Works) 44-ton locomotive built in 1943 as a narrow gauge switcher for the U.S. Army. It was later converted to standard gauge and served the docks in Oakland, Calif., on the Howard Terminal Railroad. In February 1987, it was donated by the City of Oakland to the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento, which



LEFT: In a classic scene that would soon disappear, SP GP9 No. 3760 leads the Placerville Turn past the wigwag crossing signal at White Rock on January 21, 1987. MARK ACUNA PHOTO BELOW LEFT: White Rock Road has become a busy thoroughfare, so reactivating the crossing required the classic wigwag for the crossing required the classic wigwag to be upgraded to modern flashing lights and gates in 2012. This part of the line features expansive views of the Sacramento Valley and Pacific Coast Range mountains 70 miles away.



eventually donated it to P&SVRR in 2009.

Passenger cars currently include the first of the railroad's four flat cars to be modified for passenger service, which has bench seating and shade over half the car and unobstructed standing room on the other half, and Cotton Belt bay window caboose No. 48, which was restored mostly by the Fernley Preservation Society. P&SVRR has added a walkway that allows passengers to walk between both cars.

The train is stored on the north leg of the wye at Folsom Junction on the west end of the line, so on operating weekends, the train first makes a five-mile trip eastward through the city of Folsom to Hampton Station on Saturday morning. The line generally faces southeast as the grade climbs towards the mountains, and the engine is on the east end of the train, so the morning light works well for

most locations. There are no runarounds on the P&SVRR, making the return move on Sunday afternoon a shove, so the afternoon light can also work at many spots, but the engine won't be leading.

The run through town requires flagging across 12 unprotected crossings, and the ones near major intersections require the train to stop and wait for the proper traffic signal phase before proceeding. With ten m.p.h. train speeds, this provides plenty of time to chase and capture the train in an urban environment. The paved Humbug Willow Creek trail follows most of this part of the line closely, so it's even possible to chase and photograph the train by bicycle!

Hampton Station is located on the edge of Folsom's newer suburban shopping center developments, with Starbucks and In-N-Out Burger just steps away

and many other restaurants and shops along nearby East Bidwell Street. The U.S. 50 overpass adjacent to the station has high, accessible embankments on both sides of the track that you can easily climb for elevated shots of the train in the station with the namesake Hampton Inn, Highway 50, and the Sacramento Valley in the distance as props. There are also many swallow nests under the underpass, so you might have a flock of them vociferously flying circles around you.

Immediately east of Hampton Station, however, the scenery changes drastically since there has been no housing or commercial development south of U.S. 50 (yet), making for a rural setting with grassy, rolling hills and expansive vistas of the Sacramento Valley. On clear days, you can easily see downtown Sacramento 30 miles away and even Mount Diablo and the mountains of the Pacific Coast Range 70 miles away.

Placerville Road is immediately adjacent to the line from Hampton Station to White Rock, and train speeds are still ten m.p.h., so chases are leisurely. The track goes through several cuts that allow you to get a few feet above the train, and several gentle curves afford roadside views of the entire train.

This part of the line runs northwest to southeast, and the front of the train is well-lit almost all day, so it is possible to chase the train through town in the morning light and shoot the first run of the day against the expansive Sacramento Valley to the west, take a ride during the midday sun, and then shoot again in the afternoon against the towering foothills to the east. Occasional evening specials afford many opportunities for sunset, twilight, and night photos.

So, grab your camera, come out, and take a ride on the new Placerville & Sacramento Valley Railroad. Make sure to say hello; chances are I'll be your conductor or engineer. 📷