



# REMNANTS OF THE REDWOOD EMPIRE

BY C. N. SOUTHWELL/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR EXCEPT AS NOTED

**T**HE QUIET OF AN EARLY SUNDAY morning in Schellville, Calif., is broken by the cough of an ancient diesel engine coming to life. Wearing faded gray and scarlet paint reminiscent of the old Southern Pacific, GP9 No. 1922 is gently moved clear of the high fence protecting the entirety of the Northwestern Pacific's locomotive fleet. After a crew briefing, the geep rounds a curve and faces east to head toward Brazos

(although this would've been considered timetable westward in the days of the SP). The real action, however, is leaving town on Ramal Road kicking up dust. A well-weathered Dodge Durango, equipped with hi-rail gear and decorated with an NWP logo is pointed toward Brazos. Getting from Schellville to there isn't even half of the job facing general manager and jack-of-all-trades Jake Park this morning.

A few hundred feet followed by a couple hundred stairs, and Jake has an incredible view of the San Pablo Bay from the landmark Brazos Lift Bridge. The power is turned on to the bridge's electric motors and a marine air horn is blown to provide warning to the barely existent boat traffic on the Napa River. After the span is in place and locked, a signal is given through the fog to the patient crew on No. 1922 to "bring 'er on

**OPPOSITE:** Northwestern Pacific MP15DC 1501 and genset 2009 have just crossed Route 12 in Schellville with two weeks' worth of interchange for Lombard on October 2, 2016. The track alignment through here allows for well-lit photos in the morning and afternoon. **ABOVE:** Seen from an Adirondack chair in the shade of a tree at Rams Gate Winery, the Sunday afternoon crew is westbound at Fairville on June 18, 2017. The bit of green hanging on this late in the spring was nearly fluorescent two months before, and will be nonexistent in another month as California's summer takes hold.

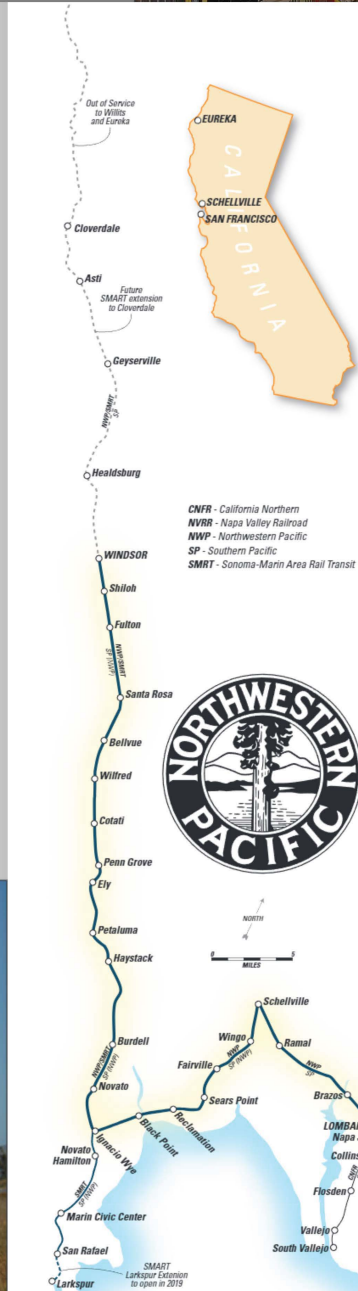
through." Jake keeps an eye out for any river traffic as his crew picks up interchange from the California Northern Railroad (CNFR) a couple miles down the tracks at Lombard. Before long, another signal is passed and the 1922 clatters over the bridge with slightly more than a handful of cars for industries around Petaluma. The bridge process resumes in reverse, and before long the Durango is crossing from Napa back into Sonoma County. Mr. Park's bridgetender duties have only just begun...

#### Espee in the Redwoods

The NWP of old made its name hauling northern California timber products, formed as a joint venture of the SP and Santa Fe, consolidating some 42 different railroads to form a continuous rail line from Schellville to Eureka, 284 miles north (SP east) of San Francisco. The Santa Fe bowed out at the beginning of the Great Depression and the NWP rolled on relatively unscathed as a subsidiary of SP. Railfans outside of the area discovered the railroad in the 1950s, thanks to a quirky passenger service known as the *Redwood*, provided

RIGHT: Jets that can be heard but not seen dawn out morning conversations from the back porches across the Napa River at Brazos. Shortly after 8:00 a.m., a marine air horn sounds and the counterweights begin to trade places with the movable span as a single sailboat comes to a halt after approaching from the north. The bridgetender yells "Five minutes!" to the skipper as GP9 1922 leads MP15DC 1501 and interchange to Lombard on June 5, 2016.

BELOW: From the opposite side of the river in the hamlet of Brazos, a Sunday afternoon crew makes its way west with feed for Petaluma and tanks for storage at Schellville on September 11, 2016.



ABOVE: The first attempt to revive the old Northwestern Pacific name came in 1996 under the auspices of North Coast Rail Authority, with classic Southern Pacific style power and paint jobs. The crew of SD9 4327 meets SD9 4324 at Windsor, Calif., on February 11, 1997. STEVE SCHMOLLINGER

by Espee's lone Budd RDC. Outside interest continued into the early '80s as SP made a habit of using multiple SD9s to haul heavy trains loaded with lumber, the foremost legal export of California's north coast.

After a devastating fire in 1978 and severe floods in the 1980s caused interruptions in service forcing many mills to ship by truck, SP expedited its escape plan. The north end of the line from Willits to Eureka became the Eureka Southern in 1984. By 1989 the North Coast Rail Authority was formed to save the line from total abandonment. The North Coast Railroad began operations in 1992, also taking over what was by then the remains of the Eureka Southern. In 1993, the SP leased the line south of Willits to the newly formed California Northern (CNFR). Operational control was surrendered by SP to the NCRA in 1996 which began to operate the line as the first incarnation of the "new" Northwestern Pacific. EMD hood units painted in SP's beautiful "black widow" scheme didn't convey the financial desperation of the new operator and the new NWP lasted only until 1998. Following a years-long infrastructure rebuilding program, the NWP resumed service between Schellville and Cotati in 2001 before being shut down a month later. A decade of darkness descended upon the legendary Redwood route.

#### NWP: Take Two

The second incarnation of the "new" NWP technically began in 2006, with the NCRA awarding

an operating contract to the new railroad by John Williams. However, it would be five long years before a wheel was turned and regular freight service resumed.

The recent history means little this morning, though. Weekend traffic begins to pick up in the nine o'clock hour as the Durango veers off the highway at Black Point. It's another walk out the deck of a bridge to a shack still adorned in faded SP maintenance yellow. Jake soon emerges from the shed with a pair of boat oars. A bit of exercise is necessary to navigate the rowboat to the pivot of the center-swing bridge.

After a quick inspection, the now-familiar sound of a marine horn alerts residents and fishermen to the presence of the NWP before the train can be heard. Another hand signal is passed and the process is reversed after the train passes. More recently, Black Point has been set up for remote electrical operation via control boxes at either end of the approaches to the bridge. Jacob Studer is the general manager now, and is able to operate without a rowboat, but instead with the frustration of getting the bridge to line up correctly from a couple hundred feet away. With the usual lack of a bridgetender here, the conductor will have to line the bridge back behind for river traffic, giving ample time for a railfan to get back ahead of the train.

The pace is about to quicken in the cab. Not far up the tracks is the wye at Ignacio and entrance onto the Mainline Subdivision of SMART, the new Sonoma-Marine Area Rail Transit commuter railroad which began operations in August 2017. More than \$500 million



ABOVE: GP9 1922 is westbound at Buchli on a chilly December 28, 2016, with a healthy cut of tanks for Schellville as the crew accelerates away from Brazos through the swampy marshes along the north rim of the San Pablo Bay.

RIGHT: A northbound SMART "preview" train departs the Santa Rosa Downtown depot on July 13, 2017, revealing the historic stone station that dates to 1903. JAMIE MILLER PHOTO

OPPOSITE TOP: SMART 112 rolls north over Gallinas Creek in Terra Linda with a test train on September 14, 2016. The unusual structure looming in the background is the Marin County Civic Center, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. JAMIE MILLER PHOTO

OPPOSITE BELOW: The wildweeds are blooming well ahead of the vineyards on a warm April 2, 2017, as MP15DC 1501 makes its way eastward at Ramal in the early afternoon. When the grapevines sprout green leaves in a month, passing locomotives will be visible only from the framerrail up.



was granted to the NCRA in 2007 to rebuild the NWP and a portion of former SP track from Lombard to Schellville to not only encourage freight but ultimately to host commuter service for the growing communities north of the bustling Bay Area.

The Mainline Subdivision starts at San Rafael (once a town on the line from Ignacio to Tiburon leading to ferries for passengers and freight) and

heads northward more than 50 miles to Windsor. It is here that the NWP encounters its greatest operational challenges despite the 45 m.p.h. track speed. Gauntlet tracks at stations with platforms that weren't built to accommodate freight equipment had to be lined into and out of by hand for months. The newly rebuilt Haystack Bascule Bridge just outside of Petaluma has been prone to problems, including subsequent

delays and the occasional stranding of NWP freight trains. A new wayside signal system took over a year to get the bugs worked out. Flooding and washouts continue to plague the railroad during California's winter rainstorms, and most recently, wildfires disrupted service as they wiped out some neighborhoods bordering the tracks.

Despite these issues, the NWP is happy to serve Petaluma, as close as it

gets to a breadbasket for the railroad. Three agricultural customers and the Lagunitas Brewing Company depend on rail in the formerly small town. One customer is located on a rickety spur that was once the mainline of the Petaluma & Santa Rosa. The motley mixture of NWP veterans, new hires, and part-time boomers from other area railroads keep the wheels turning and covered hoppers flying in what can be a dizzying and confusing array of switching moves.

Only one customer exists north of here, a very seldom-served lumber customer 20 miles north at Windsor. It has now been a full year since a train has gone north of Willowbrook Feeds.

#### Operations

With three different general managers having run the railroad so far in 2017, operational changes have been constant. Plans to avoid interfering with SMART trains are still being ironed out, but as of





**ABOVE:** A eucalyptus tree is a good place to find shade as the year enters the summer months. Midday on July 10, 2016, finds NWP 1501 crossing the immovable bascule bridge at Wingo. Watch out for snakes and spiders when staying low to the ground in summer.

**RIGHT:** The frosty morning of December 28, 2016, in the North Bay finds NWP 1922 switching Hunt & Behrens Feed on the former P&SR mainline just east of downtown Petaluma. Crews can spend hours switching around town in a frequently dizzying array of moves.

this writing, the normal operating practice is to run the Brazos Sub on Sunday afternoons starting at Ignacio and going to Lombard and return. An evening arrival at Ignacio usually leaves a nice window to run to Petaluma and back near and after dark. Another round-trip on the Mainline Sub is run sometime early in the week, generally Wednesday. One of the few constants in the operation through all the changes has been running on Sunday. A couple of other area shortlines run regularly on weekends as well, namely Central California Traction Co. at the Port of Stockton and California Northern West Valley extras to Williams. Neither offer the photographic opportunities of a day spent on the NWP, though.

Operations became needlessly complicated in fall 2016 as the NWP became embroiled in controversy. A story



broadcast last September by KPIX-TV raised the alarm of a "ticking time bomb in the middle of Wine Country." To supplement the railroad's meager income, NWP had taken in cars loaded with liquid propane (LP) to store on yard tracks at Schellville. The only spectacular explosion came when SMART was alerted by the press and nearly put a halt to NWP's freight operations. After the Sunday crew was stranded in Petaluma on September 18, 2016, due to the

failure of the Haystack Bridge, SMART wouldn't allow the NWP to run the train out of Petaluma until October 2. That afternoon, SMART prevented the crew from crossing the bridge at Brazos after they had made interchange at Lombard. The stage was set for a war, the culmination of which would be the Surface Transportation Board finding in favor of SMART regarding the storage of the LP tank cars after the NWP claimed their status as a common carrier had been



**LEFT:** Making its debut in revenue service on NWP, 1501 crosses the Petaluma River at Black Point on June 5, 2016. Backwaters from the river here wind their way underneath docks leading to small homes built over the water.

**BELOW:** Bridge timbers creak, but not loud enough to scare off the thousand feathered friends surrounding the photographer on a derelict boat dock. A view from Port Sonoma Marina on September 10, 2017, sees the Sunday afternoon crew eastbound for Lombard.

infringed upon. The NWP acquiesced to a point, replacing the loaded LP tanks filtering out to interchange with empty LP tanks coming in. Cars are still being stored at Schellville as this time.

A crew can spend hours switching in Petaluma, often in spots that necessitate having freight cars on both ends of the power. On the north side of town off Ely Road in Petaluma, Lagunitas Brewing and Willowbrook Feeds are accessed from a siding with their spurs facing opposite of one another. A siding near Payran Street provides access to the former P&SR mainline and Hunt & Behrens Feeds, one of the more photogenic customer facilities located where the rails cross Lakeville Street less than half a mile from the P&SR's connection to the siding. The silos at Dairyman's Feed tower over downtown, their spur accessed as a southbound movement just north of the SMART station along Lakeville Street. After finishing up in Petaluma the crew will depart south, crossing the Haystack Bridge. This span was built as a center-pivot swing until its replacement by SMART a few years ago. The green bascule bridge is hard to miss now, with U.S. Route 101 towering over it and Petaluma Boulevard providing access to the west side. Photos from the east side can be taken from across the Petaluma River. Walking trails southward from the Sheraton Hotel off Route 121 afford a few different angles lit well in the morning.

After crossing Haystack, the railroad hides in the hinterlands before coming up alongside U.S. 101 at Burdell and roughly following it through Novato to Ignacio. At Ignacio, the crew again trades hell for high water as they continue the journey eastward now down the Brazos Junction Subdivision. Signaled territory transitions to track warrants and the pace slows to 25 m.p.h.

After again clearing Black Point, the railroad runs along the rim of San Pablo Bay, passing the NASCAR track at Sears Point and the immovable moveable bascule bridge at Wingo. A two-mile SP-owned cutoff around Schellville left the NWP here and took at shortcut across the marsh to Ramal. An elongated V-shaped curve allows for properly lit photos of trains at any time if you can



place yourself correctly within it. There is always a chance that the crew will stop in Schellville going either direction to pick up or drop cars. There is a lumber customer here as well, located on a spur that juts to the west from the makeshift engine facility.

Less than a mile of the Sonoma Branch remains in place in Schellville. It is used as a tail track out of the wye and for storage. As the LP cars began to take up most of the available space in town, the collection of privately owned locomotives was moved to the current end of the branch which once served as the SP's backroad to Santa Rosa.

Leaving town eastbound to Brazos and Lombard was the SP, as the original NWP began at Schellville. The Brazos lift bridge is on an east-west alignment, with access to the east side hampered by a mile-long walk and the rarity of morning moves to Lombard coinciding with the clearing of the dreaded "marine layer" of high fog so common to this area. Fast roads follow the line from Ignacio to Schellville. Side roads must be used to access places like Brazos, Buchli, and Wingo, but it is nothing your handy map or GPS can't handle.

The interchange with the CFNR at Lombard is relatively easy to access via Green Island Road off Route 29 north of American Canyon. The Route 29 overpass at Lombard provides a standard angle of a train inbound from the NWP, while backlots of various industries can get you a bit closer once the crew runs down the main to pick up their interchange near the Brazos end of the yard. Be forewarned most especially on Sunday afternoons though — it can be incredibly frustrating fighting traffic getting up Route 29 and Route 12 back toward Schellville. Do not underestimate the draw of Wine Country!

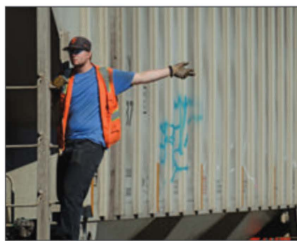
#### Motive Power

The only thing that changed more than the operating practices in 2016 may have been the motive power. Beginning the year with GP9 1922 (built by EMD in 1957 as NP 337) and RailPower genset No. 2009, NWP added MP15DC 1501 from Mid America Car in May. The former SP 2694 is resplendent in its classic "bloody nose" paint scheme, and made its first run in June 2016. A former Southern high-hood GP38-2 was purchased at an NS auction in September and debuted in November 2016. It has been subsequently leased by the neighboring Napa Valley Wine Train, supplementing its mostly Alco-powered fleet as needed.

Other locomotives have been stored on the property at Schellville for years, including SD9s and GP9s in very battered SP paint, as well as a pair of former Bessemer & Lake Erie



**ABOVE:** NWP 1922's age becomes obvious as exhaust erupts while switching the Lagunitas Brewing Company off Ely Road on Petaluma's east side on December 28, 2016. The silos of Willowbrook Feeds are on the right. Access to the spur is available only from the north, often necessitating switching with cars on each end of the locomotives.



**RIGHT:** Conductor Danylo Hawks leads a move across Payran Street at Park Siding in Petaluma on September 18, 2016. Like others working train service for the NWP, Danylo works a full-time job at another Bay Area shortline and helps out here when the schedules don't conflict.

F-units that last worked the ore dock at Conneaut, Ohio. SP bay-window caboose 1971 is also used occasionally to protect shove movements around Petaluma, adding a bit of "time warp" to local operations.

This past year has been a bit more standardized as the 1922 has been mingling with the derelict GP and SD9s at Schellville. NWP 1501 and 2009 have handled all assignments, with 1501 being the preferred power.

#### Photo Opportunities

The moveable bridges along the Brazos Junction Sub provide the photographic highlights of any trip. The Black Point swing bridge is incredibly easy to access from Route 37 and photographable from many different angles. The Grandview Avenue crossing off of Harbor Drive will allow photos of westbound trains with a telephoto lens. Driving toward the bridge on Beattie Lane may end up with a hassle from the locals but can pay off with a couple of better angles. Beattie Lane becomes a private drive as it nears the bridge so be considerate of noise, speed, and dust. Eastbound trains going over Black Point bridge can be

photographed from a boat dock at Port Sonoma, accessed from Black Point Road about 3/4 of a mile east of the bridge on Route 37. Broadside photos off the Route 37 overpass are not advised!

The immovable bascule bridge outside of the mostly abandoned hamlet of Wingo is used by both vehicular and rail traffic, but due to its remote location takes a bit of extra effort to photograph. The bridge can be accessed by getting to Noble Road through a driveway at the Ravenswood Winery on Route 121 three miles east of Sears Point.

The true highlight of any trip, though, is the infamous lift bridge at Brazos. Even the simplest way there can be confusing (a search of Google maps or GPS is strongly recommended). Cuttings Wharf road off Route 12 will bring you to Las Amigas Road. When Las Amigas swings a right toward Schellville, continue straight down Milton Road and eventually you'll cross the railroad at the west end of the bridge.

Brazos is an experience. On foggy days, small jets going to and from the airport a few miles away at Napa can sound like they're only feet overhead, yet completely invisible. When in the



**ABOVE:** Ex-SP caboose 1971 trails the last of three cuts of tanks that had been pushed west of Schellville on the single track main to avoid being damaged by floodwaters that had submerged the yard. The end of the "great propane pull-in of 2017" is seen here at Wingo on February 12, 2017.

raised position the moveable portion of the bridge can nearly disappear into the mist. When the fog lifts, the area around the bridge offers a photo and lighting angle for nearly any situation.

For those who want to exert a bit more effort, a photo of a train heading toward the CFNR at Lombard can be had if you drive to the end of Green Island Road off Route 29 north of American Canyon. A gate will prevent vehicular access about a mile short, but within view of the bridge. Luckily, everything beyond the gate is a public walking trail.

Brazos was the site of multiple incidents involving SP trains taking a bath. A set of Baldwin locomotives on a caboose hop in the 1950s went into the river when Brazos was still a swing bridge. A well-documented event in 1983 involved a pair of GP9s taking a dive, the bizarre sequence of photos by Gene Poon famously published in *Trains* Magazine. A reminder for the adventurous — black widow spiders seem to love hanging around the bridges, and are not Espee fans despite their name.

Station buildings still stand at Schellville (1902), Novato (1917), and Petaluma (1914). The Schellville station serves

as NWP headquarters, the wooden building still wearing a faded coat of green paint dating to its occupation by the California Northern over 20 years ago. The structures at Novato and Petaluma were both built in the style of Spanish missions. Both are in good shape, but neither lend itself to a great photo alongside a train.

Views of the crews switching various industries in Petaluma can be accessed from public crossings like Lakeville Street and Ely Road. Petaluma can be congested and confusing, so a little bit of planning can go a long way.

#### The Call of the Redwood Empire

The NWP today can be a challenge to find running, but fun to follow. The proximity to San Francisco and the Bay Area can give a visiting railfan an incredible amount of photographic opportunities even if the NWP isn't running. There are numerous other shortlines in the area, mainlines with commuter trains, and an amazing amount of museums and tourist trains. The area can vary quickly from rural to very congested suburbia. Traffic jams have a habit of appearing at random anywhere near wine country,

which accounts for much of the NWP's rural mileage.

Lodging can be found along the railroad in Petaluma and Novato, and not far from the rails in towns like Napa, Vallejo, and San Rafael. With the start of SMART service and winter fast approaching, the NWP will be seen only rarely during the day, but spring and summer will provide opportunities the same as the last six years.

The future here is never certain, but survival in some form for what freight remains on the Redwood Empire Route should be a safe bet. In a world of conglomerate-affiliated shortlines, the Northwestern Pacific attempts to maintain its independence, the same as the original line had done for years under the thumb of the SP. ■

*C.N. SOUTHWELL is a professional railroader from New York who currently resides in California. The author would like to thank the employees of the NWP for being so accommodating. Thanks also to Jamie Miller and Steven Welch for their assistance preparing this article.*