

THE COAST LINE'S GATEWAY TO LOS ANGELES

Santa Susana Pass

MATT C. BATRYN-RODRIGUEZ/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

When discussing mountain railroading in California, several well-known passes such as the Feather River Canyon, Donner, Tehachapi, and Cajon tend to overpower the conversation. However, California is also home to many smaller passes whose history and operations are of no less importance. Santa Susana Pass, located on the southern end of the old Southern Pacific Coast Line, is a prime example.

As initially built, the southern portion of the Coast Line relied on the Saugus

Line to get from Los Angeles to Saugus, Calif. At Saugus, it split off and followed the Santa Clara River west to Ventura. From there the tracks hung close to the coast, following it to Ellwood (near Santa Barbara) where the northern and southern portions of the Coast Line were joined, forming a through route between San Francisco and Los Angeles. However, the route through Saugus was slow due to steep grades, tight curves, and sheer distance. In 1899, as the completion of the Coast Line drew

near, Southern Pacific decided a better route was needed between Los Angeles and Ventura. The proposed line, called the Montalvo Cutoff, would run from Montalvo, a few miles east of Ventura, to Burbank, where it would connect to the Saugus Line for the last few miles into Los Angeles. However, a formidable barrier stood in its way — the Simi Hills.

The Simi Hills are a small but steep mountain range that separates the Simi Valley from the San Fernando Valley. Once part of an ancient sea floor, the

OPPOSITE: A short eastbound Union Pacific Day Bud Local (LOF41), is dwarfed by the rocks of Santa Susana Pass as it works its way upgrade on February 1, 2016. Power for the local today is a pair of leased HLCX units, led by GP38-2 1032. Leased power is not uncommon to find working on the locals based out of Gemco Yard. **ABOVE:** With four large EMDs leading the charge, a long Guadalupe Hauler (LOF67) works its way up Santa Susana Pass on September 7, 2015. Shortly, the train will be leaving the San Fernando Valley as it passes through the 7,369-foot Tunnel 26, emerging on the other end in Simi Valley.



On August 2, 2015, a westbound military train (symbol SWCOX, Special, West Colton to Oxnard, Calif.) exits Tunnel 26 and is about to pass through CP Davis as it descends into the Simi Valley. This train was handed off from BNSF to UP at West Colton, and kept its BNSF power for the run to Oxnard. Once at Oxnard, it will be handed off to the Ventura County Railroad for the final leg of its run to Port Hueneme. Military trains and BNSF power are both rare. **RIGHT:** In a rare move down the Coast Line on August 15, 2011, the westbound Ringling Brothers circus train (symbol SKASJ, Special, Kaiser to San Jose, Calif.) is about to duck into Tunnel 27 as it ascends Santa Susana Pass behind SD9043MAC 8254.



bedrock was slowly pushed upward by the area's significant tectonic activity. Centuries of erosion have shaped the hills into a striking series of massive sandstone blocks. Today, they are a recognizable backdrop from many an old Western movie as well as a well-known local landmark most often referred to simply as the "Chatsworth Rocks" or the "Rock Pile." In the eyes of Southern Pacific, however, they were primarily seen as the most significant obstacle the Montalvo Cutoff would face. Fortunately, at the north end of the hills lay a natural gap known as Santa Susana Pass. Originally used as a foot path by the native peoples and later by Spanish missionaries, at the time its most recent use had been as a crude stagecoach road

connecting the San Fernando Valley to communities along the coast. While the road itself was far too steep for railroad use, Southern Pacific was able to bore a long tunnel below the pass. This tunnel, an impressive 7,369 feet long, also contained the summit of the railroad line through the pass at 1,131 feet above sea level. Significant rock work and two smaller tunnels through the Simi Hills' rocky outcrops finally provided a viable rail route through Santa Susana Pass.

Upon its completion in 1904, the Montalvo Cutoff gave traffic on the Coast Line numerous advantages over the original route. The new line was six miles shorter, its grades were now just 1 percent instead of 2.1 percent, and curves were reduced to 6 degrees from 10 degrees. In addition, the route through Santa Susana Pass avoided the San Fernando Tunnel, which was the most congested part of the Saugus Line. Taken together, these improvements greatly



ABOVE LEFT: On the afternoon of May 28, 2009, Metrolink F59PH No. 868 leads a westbound commuter train out of Tunnel 26 and into the Simi Valley. **ABOVE:** On the morning of February 2, 2009, Amtrak train No. 11, the northbound Coast Starlight, passes the scars of past wildfires on Santa Susana Pass. **LEFT:** On May 20, 2010, Amtrak F50PHI No. 453 leads northbound afternoon train No. 775, the Pacific Surfliner, to San Luis Obispo. In recent years this fill has been nearly obscured by brush growth.

traveling between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Since it was the shortest route between the two cities, it also proved useful for expedited overnight freight service. World War II is often considered the route's finest hour, with more trains running over it than ever before. However, the general decline in passenger rail travel since then was not kind to the Coast Line. In the late 1980s, Southern Pacific decided to discontinue it as a route for through freights, leaving Amtrak's *Coast Starlight*, local freights, and seasonal sugar beet trains as the only traffic on the line. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a resurgence of through freight traffic until the recession of 2008 did away with nearly all of it. In the end, the salvation of Santa Susana Pass has come in the form of passenger traffic from Metrolink and Amtrak.

At present Metrolink operates 14 trains over Santa Susana Pass each weekday. They run between Los Angeles Union Station to the east and either Moorpark or Ventura to the west, with the majority of the eastbounds running in the morning and the majority of the westbounds returning in the afternoon. Amtrak runs ten daily Pacific Surfliner trains between LAUS and either Goleta or San Luis Obispo over the pass. Their schedule is more evenly spread

reduced running times on the southern end of the Coast Line.

Over the years little changed on the Pass, a testament to the high quality of engineering put into building it. In 1991, Southern Pacific sold much of the Montalvo Cutoff, including Santa Susana Pass to Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. The Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA) was formed by these two counties, along with three others, for the purpose of operating commuter rail service in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. Metrolink, the commuter rail service run by SCRRA, started operating its first commuter trains over the pass in October 1992. As a condition of the sale, Southern Pacific retained freight trackage rights over the line. With Union Pacific's acquisition of SP in 1996 these trackage rights passed to UP.

Today Santa Susana Pass is part of

Metrolink's Ventura Subdivision, which runs from Moorpark to Burbank Junction. The entirety of the Ventura Sub is now operated under Centralized Traffic Control, with Positive Train Control also in use over the entire line. Automatic Train Stop is in use on portions of the pass to ensure trains operating down-grade do not exceed speed limits.

The entire pass is laid with 136-pound-per-yard continuous welded rail on concrete ties. Train speeds reflect the high quality track, with passenger trains being limited to 80 miles per hour and freights limited to 40 miles per hour.

Passenger Trains

Since the beginning, the Coast Line, with its scenic vistas of the Pacific Ocean, proved popular with passengers

throughout the day, with most of the *Surfliners* traversing the pass in daylight. In addition, the *Coast Starlight*, Amtrak's long distance passenger train between Los Angeles and Seattle, Wash., travels over the pass once in both directions each day.

Freight Action

The Union Pacific freight traffic over the pass is rather sparse. Road freights that show up most commonly are the "Coast Oil Cans" and repositioning ("repo") trains that are either comprised of empty intermodal equipment or empty autoracks. The intermodal trains are typically run from Oakland, Calif., to various yards in the Los Angeles area. The empty autorack trains originate in Milpitas, Calif., and are run to various locations along the Sunset Route. Both

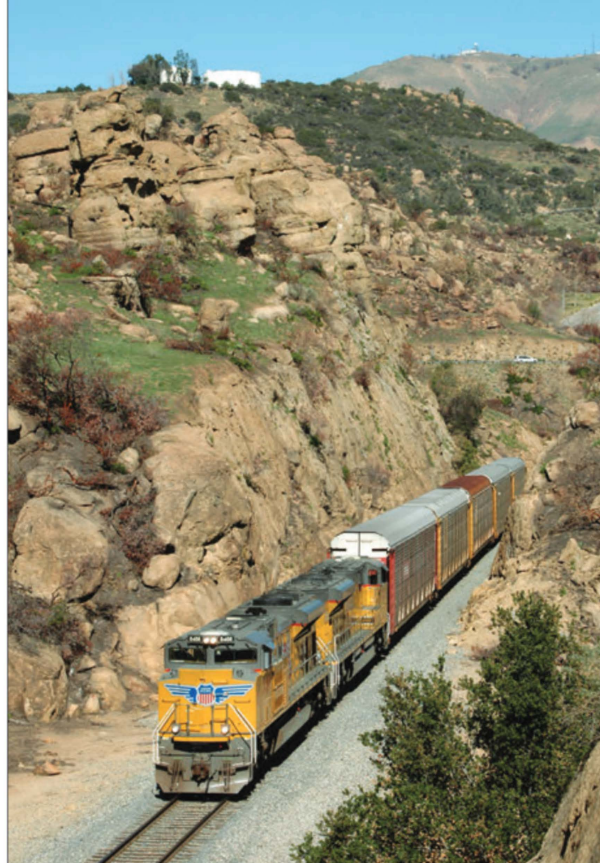
are run as needed under a variety of different symbols, depending on their destination. As of this writing, three to five repo trains a week is typical.

The "Coast Oil Cans" are crude oil tank trains that runs between Wunpost in the San Ardo Oil Field and a large refinery in Carson, Calif. The empty westbound train uses the symbol ODOWP, while loaded eastbound is run as the OWPDO. The Cans tend to make two or three one-way trips each week and are

notorious for running at night. However, it is not uncommon for the eastbound train to make a morning appearance on Santa Susana Pass, typically after the morning commute rush. Other road freights do show up from time to time, but predicting their operations is far more difficult.

Several local freights also run over Santa Susana Pass. All of these work out of Gemco Yard in Van Nuys, Calif., a few miles to the east. A short-range

RIGHT: Amtrak No. 461 leads Train 775 out of Tunnel 28 as it heads upgrade on October 1, 2009. BELOW: After having set out two loads at a Simi Valley lumber yard on February 1, 2016, the Union Pacific Day Bud Local (LOF41), returning as light power, passes the old SP Santa Susana Depot on its way back to Gemco. The station was moved to its current location in Santa Susana Park in 1975 and has been completely restored. The Kuehner Drive overpass provides the vantage point.



local called the Day Bud Local (LOF41) can make a morning appearance on the pass. While most of its work is within the San Fernando Valley, once or twice a week it will run over the pass to serve a lumberyard in Simi Valley. Mondays are the most likely day to see it on the pass, though a Thursday or Friday run is also common. This job is usually powered by a pair of four-axle EMD locomotives, typically GP38-2s or GP40-2s, and it often takes only the cars that are needed for the lumber yard, resulting in a light power move on one leg of the trip.

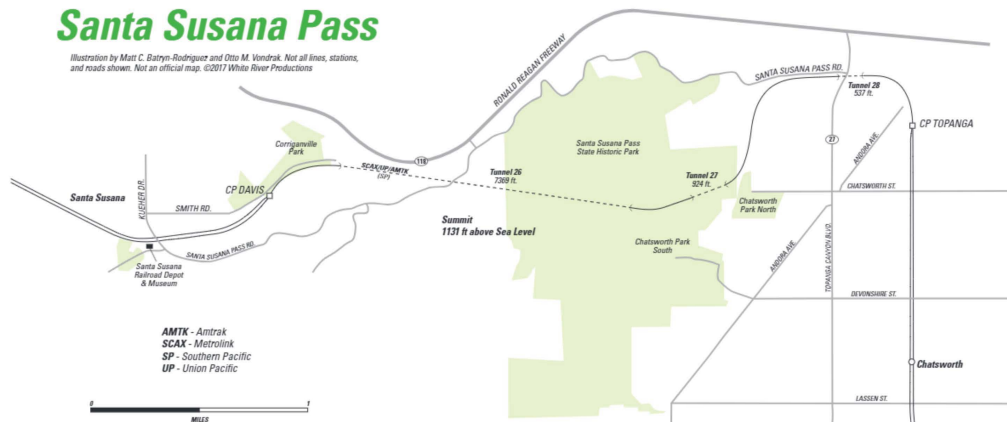
On Mondays and Thursdays, a long-distance local known as the Guadalupe Turn (LOF67) runs out of Gemco Yard to Guadalupe, Calif., with a large setout made in Oxnard, Calif. This train typically departs Gemco Yard sometime after 3:00 in the afternoon, putting it on Santa Susana Pass in mid-afternoon to early evening.

On Tuesdays and Fridays, this train returns from Guadalupe as the LOF66, but its run over the pass is typically well after dark. On Wednesdays, an abridged version of the turn called the Leesdale Local (LOF65) runs from Gemco to

LEFT: Two UP SD70ACes on the Leesdale Local (symbol LOF65) easily manage five empty autoracks destined for the Ventura County Railroad in Oxnard as they climb the 1 percent grade of Santa Susana Pass. When this photo was taken on February 3, 2009, the Leesdale Local was a five-day-a-week job. Since then the departure time has been moved to mornings, and the job has been changed to run to Guadalupe and back (LOF67 and LOF66) two times a week, with the Leesdale Local running on Wednesdays only.

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Illustration by Matt C. Batym-Rodriguez and Otto M. Vendrak. Not all lines, stations, and roads shown. Not an official map. ©2017 White River Productions





With temperatures in the triple digits on the afternoon of May 17, 2009, the westbound empty Oil Cans (ODOWP) works upgrade between Tunnel 27 and Tunnel 26. Power for the Cans this day is two SD9043MACs sandwiching an SD70ACe. A wildfire that came through the pass during the previous winter left far less brush than usual on the hillsides. **RIGHT:** Westbound Metrolink train No. 177, led by F59PHI No. 883, climbs Santa Susana Pass on its way to Ventura on this clear October 1, 2009, afternoon.

Oxnard and back on a similar schedule. The Guadalupe Turn and Leesdale Local typically run with several six-axle road units, SD70Ms and SD60Ms being the most common as of this writing. The size of these trains can vary greatly, but long trains of 80 to 100 cars are not uncommon.

Visiting Santa Susana Pass

Viewing Santa Susana Pass is relatively easy since much of the land surrounding it is open to the public. While there are a few locations where one can park near the tracks, most views of the railroad require at least a little walking. On the east side of the pass, Stony Point Park, Chatsworth Park North, Chatsworth Park South (currently closed), and Santa Susana Pass State Historic Park all contain hiking trails that offer views of the pass. Rocky Peak Park, Corriganville Park, and Santa Susana Park present other points of access on the western side. The Santa Susana depot, located in Santa Susana Park, was moved to its current location in 1975 and has been beautifully restored. It offers a nice trackside viewing area along with interpretive displays and an impressive model railroad layout.



ABOVE: With a full moon illuminating the Simi Hills on the evening of September 28, 2015, northbound Amtrak Surfliner No. 785 works its way upgrade out of the San Fernando Valley. **LEFT:** The massive sandstone formations that make up the hillsides of Santa Susana Pass dwarf Amtrak Train 777 as it works its way up grade between Tunnel 27 and Tunnel 26 on the clear afternoon of October 31, 2015. This train originates in San Diego in the morning and runs all the way north (west while on Metrolink) for an evening arrival in San Luis Obispo.



If a ride over the pass is more your style, Chatsworth station to the east and Simi Valley station to the west are served by both Metrolink and Amtrak's Pacific Surfliners. Riding between these two stations can be done in a relatively short amount of time and offers a unique perspective. If you have extra time, consider continuing the ride west (north) to view the picturesque Southern Californian coastline.

While Santa Susana Pass may not be

the most famous of railroad mountain passes, it is a vital part of the Coast Line that deserves its own degree of recognition. Though the amount of traffic has varied significantly over the years, today it is a busy piece of railroad that still fulfills the purpose for which was originally constructed. With more than a hundred years of continuous operation behind it, there is every reason to expect it will continue to serve as a vital rail line well into the foreseeable future. 📍

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