



CALIFORNIA GOLD COUNTRY SHORTLINE

Sierra Northern

BY JAKE MIILLE/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

RAILROADS AND AMERICAN HISTORY go hand in hand. Nowhere else is that so evident as it is in northern California. The Sierra Northern Railroad (SERA) operates in the same mining towns that were once known as the heart of the California Gold Rush of the late 19th century. The region served by the railroad's Oakdale Division between Oakdale and Sonora, Calif., is best described as “forgotten.” Most of the roads in this area are still dirt, many structures lie abandoned, and the only visible life is herds of free-ranging cattle grazing throughout the golden brown hills. There are few obvious intrusions from the modern world, which gives the countryside a sense of timelessness.

Cutting through this all-but-forgotten land is a historic railroad line that is continuing more than 100 years of dependable service.

History

The Sierra Northern was formed from the 2003 merger of the Sierra Railroad and the Yolo Shortline, and currently operates more than 100 miles of track in Mendocino, Tuolumne, Stanislaus, and Yolo counties. Owner Sierra Industrial Group also owns the California Western Railroad (the “Skunk Train”) in Fort Bragg, as well as the Sierra Energy technology group. The three rail operations (two Sierra Northern divisions and the California Western)

do not connect to one another, but share common resources and management.

Founded as the Sierra Railway Co. in 1897, the railroad was designed to connect California's Gold Country with the Central Valley region. Completed in 1900, the railroad stretched from Oakdale to Tuolumne and Angels Camp. Reorganized in 1937, the Sierra Railroad cut back to Jamestown, and later made the switch from steam to diesel in 1955. The “Railtown 1897” tourist attraction opened at Jamestown in 1971, but was closed by 1979. The state purchased the Jamestown complex in 1982, operating it as Railtown 1897 State Historic Park. The former Sierra Railroad makes up the bulk of SERA's Oakdale Division.

OPPOSITE: With loaded lumber cars in tow, Sierra Northern No. 52 winds its way through the foothills around Keystone, Calif., on March 18, 2014. TOP: Sierra Northern RP20BD No. 52 (rebuilt from a Santa Fe GP7) and GP20 No. 48 (built for Santa Fe in 1961 as No. 1162) cross Tim Bell Road near Paulsell, Calif., on March 18, 2014. These lonely dirt roads are frequented by the local farmers and not many others.



ABOVE: The “Fassler Flyer” rolls along the former Sierra Railway tracks between Jack’s Siding and Keystone on March 18, 2014. This particular stretch of line parallels Highway 108.

RIGHT: After traveling through a remote section of track south of Keystone, the Fassler Flyer reappears at Cooperstown. The loaded centerbeam flats were picked up at Fassler, near the end of the line at Standard.

OPPOSITE: On a cold winter day, Sierra Northern No. 134 leads a private excursion along the Woodland Branch near Leeman on January 7, 2014. This train will pull down to the siding at Beardsley and then head back to Woodland. The GP7u is former Yolo Shortline, originally built for the Santa Fe as No. 2704 in 1952.



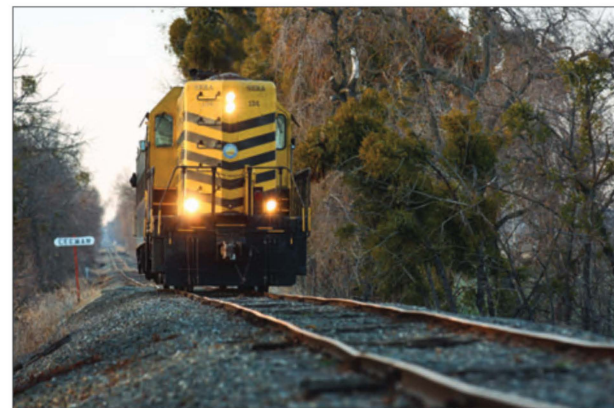
The Yolo Shortline (YSLR) was formed in 1990 to operate the former Sacramento Northern Clarksburg Branch that was cast off by Union Pacific in 1990. The ex-SN Woodland Branch was added in 1992. When the Sierra Railroad purchased YSLR in 2003, only the Woodland Branch and operations at the Port of Sacramento remained. These former YSLR operations make up the SERA Woodland Division. The

abandoned right of way south of the Port has been converted into a rail trail.

The Oakdale Division

The Sierra Northern Oakdale Division is unlike any other you will find. The line, which lies between the towns of Oakdale and Sonora, was completed in 1900 to connect the San Joaquin Valley with the Sierra foothills. Oakdale was founded in 1871 when the Stockton & Visalia

Railroad met the Copperopolis Railroad. Today, SERA interchanges with both the Union Pacific and BNSF Railway. Three times a week the local works between Oakdale and Riverbank (known as the “Riverbank Rocket”). On two other days of the week, the Oakdale local makes the long, slow trek up to Sonora. This journey involves older infrastructure, which brings along a diverse set of challenges for the railroaders running



the train. This train is known as the “Fassler Flyer,” and it will be the focus of this article.

At the top of the Oakdale Division lies Fassler, a railroad name given to a lumber mill at Standard, Calif., just east of Sonora. At Fassler you’re likely to find the SERA local picking up or dropping off a few loaded center beams. The area around Fassler feels like a small industrial park, with the forest and mountains continuing to the east, and Sonora to the west.

After departing Fassler, the local will soon wind its way through Sonora — a town founded by Mexican miners — reminiscent of Sonora, Mexico. During the Gold Rush, Sonora was a booming industrial center in California’s Mother Lode. While in Sonora, the train passes right by the local shopping center. Here the train will have to blow for a number of crossings while slowing traffic in many

directions. Those planning to chase this train should take care of personal needs like food, drink, and restroom, since there isn't much between Sonora and Oakdale.

Soon after passing through the heart of Sonora, the tracks cross Highway 108 and wind their way into Jamestown, Calif., home of Railtown 1897 State Historic Park. Here, the Fassler Flyer will pass right by the museum. There is nothing quite like seeing a modern operation pass right next to an old water tower and historical equipment. Part of what makes this area such a treasure is that the "wild west" scenery has been a hotspot for numerous television and movie shoots over the decades. This area is great for photographers, as much of the scenery remains unchanged.

Continuing south from Jamestown,

RIGHT: Sierra Northern 52 passes the old water tower located at Railtown 1897 on March 18, 2014. On only its second week of revenue service, the shiny locomotive provides a stark contrast to the old water tower.

BELOW: Rocky volcanic cliffs loom in the distance as the Sierra Northern Fassler Flyer snakes its way through Jack's Siding.



ABOVE: The Fassler Flyer rolls through the crossing at Warnerville Road near Oakdale, Calif. The lush rolling foothills eventually give way to the snow-capped mountain peaks in the distance.



the Fassler Flyer will serve the Granite Rock Spur (West Jamestown) and the Chinese Camp Lumber Mill. Here the train will often add a number of cars to its consist, making it slightly more impressive to the eye. Both West Jamestown and Chinese Camp are easily accessible by local highways and roads.

After Chinese Camp comes one of my favorite stretches of track. This is the section between Jack's Siding and Keystone, where Highway 108 parallels right along the tracks. As a kid growing up, my grandfather owned a cabin near Mi Wuk, Calif. A few times a year, my family would drive up to the cabin to spend time in the snow or at the lake. Each time we would pass this historic stretch of track. As a young kid, I always dreamed of seeing a train rolling along this line with the towering rock formations in the distance. I was finally able to fulfill this dream on March 18, 2014, when I shot the Fassler Flyer rolling along this exact area. It was one of those moments as a railroad photographer I will never forget.

After traveling along Highway 108 for just over a mile, the railroad and the highway go their separate ways.

Next stop along the rail line is a station named Keystone. At Keystone the train will work the California Wood Shaving Company before heading into a remote and inaccessible section of track.

For those railfans looking to chase the train after Keystone, immediately head for Cooperstown. You will be driving in an area away from the tracks for about 30 minutes. At Cooperstown, don't be surprised if you're the only person out there. The roads are dirt and the land is empty. Once the train arrives, you will have an easy chase through the foothills as you head back to Oakdale.

Part of the reason this line is so conducive to chasing is that the speed limit is ten m.p.h. from Fassler to Cooperstown. It then varies between ten and 20 m.p.h. between Cooperstown and Oakdale. The tracks have been designated "excepted" by the Federal Railroad Administration; tracks with this designation are exempt from compliance with minimum requirements for roadbed, track geometry and track structure. Although the train travels at slow speeds, the sound of the train is like music to any railfan's ears. The clicking and clacking of jointed rail is something not heard on most rail lines in California.

Visiting California Gold Country

The Oakdale Division was completed around 1900, and much of the surrounding right of way appears untouched since then. The views will give you a glimpse back 160 years to the Gold Rush period. The grassy brown hills spotted with majestic oak trees makes for a classic northern California feel. As you head back into the valley, the towering snow-capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada will loom in the distance. When you visit this region, you might very well forget it's 2015.

After chasing the Fassler Flyer from Sonora to Oakdale, there is still plenty to do. I would recommend visiting Railtown 1897 in Jamestown. From April to October the museum offers weekend train rides. This ride will take you along the same tracks the Fassler Flyer travels on. The museum also offers an extensive collection of historic railroad equipment including steam locomotives. It is a must visit for anyone interested in railroad history.

If riding the train at Railtown 1897 isn't enough, I suggest taking a ride on the *Sierra Dinner Train*. Not only will you get to take in the sights and sounds of a classic railroad journey, you will be



ABOVE: The chase continues between Cooperstown and Warnerville. You are most likely to enjoy the company of grazing free-range cows on the grassy green hills since few others travel the old dirt roads in Gold Rush country.

RIGHT: In the afternoon, thunderstorms will often gather over the Sierra Nevada. Luckily, the train usually stays clear of these storms as it heads back into the valley. Here SERA No. 52 crests a gentle grade at Warnerville on March 18, 2014.



served a four-course meal along the way. The train will take you into the foothills from Oakdale to Warnerville and back. This is a great way to enjoy a nice dinner while railfanning. How could life get any better than that?

A note to consider since railfans travel on their stomachs: Only ten minutes away from Fassler is Cover's Apple Ranch, which is home to "mile high" apple pie and possibly the best apple turnovers you will ever taste.

The Woodland Division

If you cannot make it all the way out to Oakdale but still want to see the Sierra Northern Railway in action, you're in luck. Sierra Northern operates between West Sacramento and Woodland on the weekdays. The train will start off servicing the Port of West Sacramento. From there, it will make the slow journey to Woodland, usually in the early afternoon.

The highlight of this line (known

as the Woodland Branch) is the large wooden trestle just east of Woodland. Sierra Northern has plans to retire this structure due to age and deterioration. The current plan involves possibly building new track between Woodland and Davis via the Conway Ranch. This would in turn retire the entire line between Woodland and West Sacramento. There is no firm timetable for the completion of this project.

While not quite as varied and

interesting as the Oakdale Division, the Woodland Division still has a lot to offer. Like the Oakdale Division, you can ride this line aboard its *Sacramento River Train* while enjoying a gourmet dinner. Many of the rides have a theme, such as the "Zombie Train" or the "Pumpkin Train." This can make the journey fun for the whole family. If you're looking to leave the kids at home, check out the

"Beer Train," which will give you the opportunity to sample a variety of local brews.

A Golden Opportunity

Tucked away in California's Gold Country, you will find yourself stepping back in time. This small operation is often forgotten but provides excellent opportunity for photographers, railfans,

and anyone who likes trains. So pack up the camera and come on out! Whether you're a hardcore railfan or just someone who enjoys being around trains, Sierra Northern has a lot to offer. For information on the passenger trains, visit stieranorthern.com.

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RIGHT: On a late afternoon, Sierra Northern GP9 No. 131 leads the *Sacramento River Train* across the long wooden bridge east of Woodland on July 27, 2013. Passengers on board this train are able to enjoy a beautiful sunset along with their gourmet dinner. SERA No. 131 was originally built for the Southern Pacific as No. 5759 in 1957.

BELOW: The *Burrard* was built by Pullman for Canadian National 1954, and is now a privately owned railcar which sees occasional service on the Woodland Branch. Here, it crosses the bridge located between Beardsley and Leeman on January 7, 2014.

