
South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

July 2014

Issue No. 4



Railroads of the South Bay

The railroad depot in National City was built in 1882 to serve as the western terminus of the Santa Fe railway system. Today it is a museum, the last remaining original transcontinental terminus station, and a symbol of the importance of railroads in the history of the South Bay.

The first railroads planned for the South Bay were never built. The San Diego & Gila was supposed to connect through Mission Valley with Tom Scott's Texas Pacific, but the mountains proved too steep. Frank Kimball had a southern route surveyed in 1870 for the San Diego & Gila through the Otay Valley that followed the stage coach line to Campo, but Tom Scott went bankrupt after the "Black Friday"

financial collapse in 1873. The powerful San Francisco "Railroad Barons" of the Southern Pacific took over the Texas Pacific and rejected all plans for a railroad to San Diego.

Kimball turned to a rival of the barons who favored a railroad to San Diego. The Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe had been building west from Chicago following a southern route to California. Kimball gave the Santa Fe half his ranch to build the terminus in National City. The deal was struck in October 1880 and the California Southern Railroad was created (not to be confused with the rival transcontinental railroad, the Southern California of the San Francisco barons). The Santa Fe built a railroad yard on 225 acres in southwest National City in 1881 and a depot in 1882 that still stands today. The California

Southern connected with the Santa Fe at Barstow in 1885 and brought the first transcontinental trains to National City in November, setting off the famous "Boom of the '80s" that swelled the population of San Diego and created new towns in the South Bay over the next four years. However, in 1889, the Santa Fe moved its railroad yard to San Bernardino, ending the prosperity that Frank Kimball hoped a railroad terminus would bring to the South Bay.



Although the railroad business was gone, the Santa Fe remained a permanent landowner in the South Bay. It created the Land and Town Company in 1885 to develop its holdings in the area. The Sweetwater Dam was built to provide water for the 5000 acres of lemon trees that became the city of Chula Vista. The company built the National City and Otay railroad from San Diego to the border, the first commuter line in the county and the precursor of today's trolley line. The first section of the NC&O began running trains in June 1887 from its depot in downtown San Diego to Chula Vista and Otay, with a branch line through Bonita to the Sweetwater Dam. The NC&O was popular from the beginning and carried 421,783

passengers, mostly tourists, by the end of the year. The southern extension of the railroad reached Tijuana at the border by May 1888, with a side line to the new hotel in Oneonta. Thousands took the train to see the horse races and bear fights at the border, and bare knuckle boxing matches refereed by Wyatt Earp. The NC&O had a great influence on the development of the South Bay. Boom towns sprang up along its route, from La Presa north of the dam to Otay, South San Diego, Oneonta and Tijuana. Farms and orchards expanded in Chula Vista, Otay, Highland and the Tijuana river valley.

The man who built the Hotel del Coronado also built a commuter railroad around the bay. Elisha Babcock brought hotel guests from the Coronado ferry landing to his hotel when it opened in Feb. 1888 by means of a rail line down Orange Avenue. Babcock had built the first transit system in San Diego in 1886 when horsecars brought passengers to the ferry landing in downtown San Diego. By August 1888, he constructed the Coronado Belt Line from National City around the bay and up the Strand to the hotel. Babcock bought land in the South Bay served by the Belt Line to develop Coronado Heights, South Coronado, and South San Diego (which later became Imperial Beach). He built a spur line from his Otay Wells junction into the Otay river valley for sand and gravel that was used in Coronado for construction of roads and jetties. His line also connected with the NC&O at Fruitland, bringing passengers to Coronado and to the Tent City that became popular on the Strand after 1900. Babcock purchased the Salt Works at the La Punta station of his railway and his Western Salt Company became the largest producer of salt in California.



Babcock helped William Carlson construct the San Diego and Phoenix Railway in the Otay valley in 1893. Carlson had the same dream as Tom Scott, to build a line on the southern route to Yuma through the Otay valley. The line began at Phoenix Park in Otay where Babcock's spur line crossed Hollister Road. Carlson went bankrupt by 1896, his line only reaching as far as the Daneri winery in the valley. However, Babcock built a large pavilion and picnic grounds at Phoenix Park which proved popular for another decade.

John D. Spreckels bought the NC&O in 1907 and electrified the line, creating a streetcar system known as the San Diego Southern Railway. The streetcars powered by overhead wires went from San Diego to Otay, but floods in the 1890s destroyed the tracks further south. The San Diego Southern Railway merged with the San Diego & Cuyamaca Railway in 1912 to form the San Diego & South Eastern Railway.



In Imperial Beach, Babcock's The Mexico and San Diego Railway took passengers from the boat landing at the end of 10th Street to the ocean beach and pier.

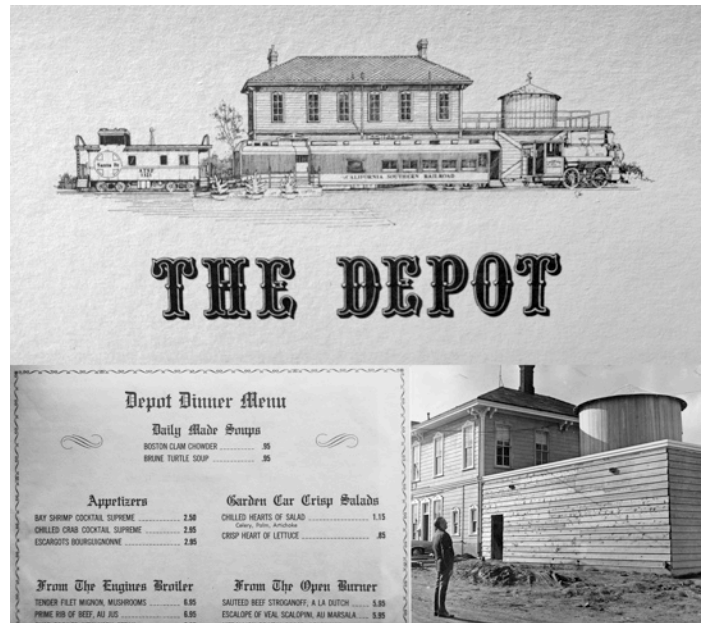
Elisha Babcock developed a rival electric streetcar line with his Los Angeles & San Diego Beach Railway from San Diego to La Jolla, and in 1908 built the Mexico & San Diego Railway that

connected his Belt Line at 10th Street in South San Diego with the new development of Imperial Beach. In 1913, this short line used two wireless battery streetcars that Babcock also would install on his La Jolla line. Babcock planned to extend the Mexico & San Diego Railway south to the border, but the floods of 1916 ended all streetcar service south of Chula Vista.

Spreckels began construction of a new railroad in 1907, the San Diego & Arizona, that ran from San Diego to Tijuana, through Mexico to Tecate and across the Carriso Gorge to El Centro. The line was open to Tijuana by 1910, to Campo by 1916, and to El Centro by 1919. New depots were built in San Diego in 1915, in Campo in 1917, in Tecate and Chula Vista in 1919. The depot in El Centro was demolished in 2011. The "Short Line" trains carried passengers to the Agua Caliente resort and racetrack, but passenger service ended in 1968. After Spreckels died in 1922, his heirs no longer wanted the railroad, and sold it to the Southern Pacific by 1932 when it was renamed the San Diego & Arizona Eastern Railway. The Santa Fe continued to run its freight trains over the SD&AE tracks until 1968, with big customers such as Western Salt, Tecate Brewery, Rohr Aircraft and Chula Vista fruit and vegetable packers shipping more than 1000 carloads per year. After storm damage in 1976, the Southern Pacific decided to abandon the line, and it was sold to the San Diego MTS for a trolley line that opened in 1981.

With the end of passenger service, the historic National City Depot stood empty after 1968. Freight trains passed by with lumber from the new Marine Terminal built in 1968 at the end of 24th Street. In 1972 Milton Pollard joined with National City to develop a restaurant in the old depot. A replica of the old water tower was built on the end of the building to house a kitchen. The "Old 82" locomotive built in 1884 by the Rhode Island Railroad was donated by Jerry Williams, who had been storing it at his Scrap Disposal, Inc. yards. A club car came from Northern California to become a "Gay '90s" bar, and a caboose was added from Stockton. The great brick fireplace upstairs was uncovered from behind a wall for the

Kimball Room dining area. The big railroad safe downstairs became a wine cellar. The restaurant was called "The Depot" and was open for a couple of years, but closed in 1975. Al Champion and Fred Corey opened The Spaghetti Depot restaurant there in 1977 but it also closed. A redevelopment of the waterfront began in 1988 with the expansion of the boat launch into Pepper Park and the establishment in 1990 of the large auto import facility by the Pasha Group. The San Diego Electric Railway Association renovated the Depot into a museum that was declared a California Registered Historical Landmark in 1997. Railcar Plaza was built in 2000 to hold a restored streetcar coach No. 1 from 1887. The Pier 32 Marina opened in 2007, and soon the sights and sounds of National City's railroad era could again be seen and



The Chula Vista depot for the San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railroad was built at 350 Third Avenue in 1919, now the site of Fuddrucker's. This new depot replaced the old NC&O depot that had stood in the center of Third Avenue since 1887.

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The NC&O tracks are still visible at the old Palm City depot along Hollister Street.



The San Diego and Arizona depot in El Centro was demolished in 2011.

Founders in the South Bay Chinese Community, Part I

by Harry Orgovan

The discovery of gold in 1849 was considered the lure which brought many Chinese to the shores of California. The Chinese called California, “Gold Mountain” or in Cantonese “Gum Saan.” The southern part of China was experiencing famine, wars and rebellion during this time. Families would send their sons to



foreign lands in hopes of seeking their fortune to send money back to the family. (1) The first Chinese in San Diego came from the California gold mines where they had experienced racially hostile environments. Excluded from the best diggings, they took positions as cooks and laundrymen in the mining camps. They also played roles in the building of the railroads, fishing and agricultural industries. They were confined to unskilled jobs at the bottom of the wage scale. Some of the first Chinese to come to San Diego were fisherman. The property tax lists of 1863 and 1864 listed boats and nets. In 1867 the fisherman Juk Sing lived at Ballast Point with his wife and made lots of money selling fish. Chinese peddlers sold fish from door to door. By 1869 there was a small group of redwood shacks,

some on stilts, on the mudflats at the end of First Street in New Town. The area between Second and Fifth Streets next to the Stingaree red light district became Chinatown in San Diego. The Chinese fishing village was in the area occupied by the San Diego Convention Center today. In 1881 railroad construction along the waterfront forced the fisherman to move to Roseville where another Chinese fishing village had been established (where the San Diego Yacht Club is today). The 1870 census listed 9 Chinese in San Diego, all between the ages of 21-36. By 1880 the census listed five families with children. Among the population of 8,618 only 229 were Chinese. The census listed 118 men working in the service industry as cooks, laundrymen, gardeners, and servants. There were forty laborers, four merchants and two herbalists. Chinese junks fished the Bay with nets and by line in the kelp beds offshore. The Roseville fisherman went far down the Baja coast in search of abalone and shellfish, which grew to 700 tons by 1880. Roseville at that time was at the mouth of the San Diego River, had ten shanties, drying racks and salting tanks. Roseville also became the location where Chinese ship building took place. (2)

In 1848 Tom Chong-kwan was born in the Tom family in Namzha village, part of Changsha city, in the Holping District of Guangdong Province. At a young age his parents moved to Canton where he attended American missionary school and learned English and adopted the Christian religion. At the age of 20 he was sent to San Francisco at the cost of \$50 by ship. The voyage took about three weeks. Given the name Ah Quin by American immigration officials, he became affiliated with the Chinese Mission and continued his studies in both religion and English. His first six years were spent as housekeeper and cook for military officers at Camp Reynolds on Angel Island. In 1873 Ah



Ah Quin and his family 1899

Quin went to Santa Barbara to learn the merchandizing trade from his uncle. From there he was sent to a coal mining camp in Alaska. While in Alaska he cut off his “queue,” the ponytail the Emperor of China required all men to wear. This signaled his desire to become an American and never to return to China. He then went back to Santa Barbara and then made a trip to San Diego. There he befriended George Marston and Reverend Camp of the San Diego Chinese Mission. In 1881 Marston invited Quin to direct the Chinese labor that was needed to build the railroad. Quin opened a store in the Stingaree district and would provide provisions for families he had found employment. Quin had to reach out to Chinese living north of San Diego to fill railroad labor camps. That same year of 1881, Quin married Sue Leong who was a ward of the Chinese Presbyterian Mission in San Francisco. They lived in San Diego where they had 12 children, including the first Chinese boy born in San Diego. When the work was over on the railroad Quin bought real estate and leased properties in Mission Valley and Bonita. He leased to fellow Chinese so they could grow vegetables to sell at market. He became the most influential person in Chinatown and was called upon to translate in court cases when a Chinese translator was needed. (3)

In 1873 the United States Army evicted Chinese fisherman operating from Ballast Point and they moved to La Playa where they established a shipbuilding industry. 1876 saw a state law regulating the size of Chinese net meshes reducing the size of the catches. In 1879 Congress voted to limit 15 Chinese per vessel coming from China. President Hayes vetoed the bill because it conflicted with agreements made with China. But the Angell Treaty of 1880 changed this agreement. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which per the terms of the Angell Treaty suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years. The Act also required every Chinese person going in and out of the country to carry a certificate identifying his or her status as a laborer, scholar, diplomat or merchant. By 1886 there were 12 Chinese fishing companies operating 18 junks. By the next year local fisherman Captain William Kehoe blamed Chinese fisherman for the decrease in the number of large fish in the Bay. In 1888 Congress passed the Scott Act which made re-



The famous Chinese junk Ning Po visited San Diego bay in 1913 and attracted attention because of its reputation as a pirate ship. It was built in 1753 at Foo Chow and for more than 150 years smuggled opium, carried slaves to Macao, pillaged villages on the Pei Ho and Yangtze rivers. When captured by the Chinese government, it was used as a prison ship. It was last used as a military vessel by the Manchu dynasty in 1910.

entry to the United States after a trip to China impossible. Congress voted to extend the Exclusion Act for ten more years in the Geary Act of 1892. Within a year only one Chinese boat was still fishing in San Diego Bay. The 1902 renewal of the Exclusion Act expanded prohibition to cover Hawaii and the Philippines. In 1915 regulations banning the drying and export of abalone meat from California passed, thus ending Chinese participation in the industry. The next year the last Chinese junk was sold. The Exclusion Act was extended indefinitely and not repealed until 1943, aiding the morale of a wartime ally during World War II. (4) The Exclusion Act stopped the Chinese from fishing outside United States waters. Many Chinese turned to farming in Mission Valley and the Sweetwater area. (5)

The 1880's saw the arrival to San Diego of Quon Mane. Quon, with the help of George Marston, started the Quon Mane Oriental arts goods business. The great demand for labor during this time period was

supplemented through the “Seven Companies of San Francisco” or as it was later to be called, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (still existing today). They hired more than 100 laborers. Another leader in the Chinese labor community was Ah Lem who began working for Frank Kimball in 1882. He was indispensable to Kimball and the spokesman for all of his work crews. It was Ah Lem who organized the Sweetwater Dam work crew. In 1884 Frank Kimball opened the rear of his real estate office to the public as a library. Ah Lem moved the books from his home to the library area. 1883-1884 saw heavy rainfall of 25.97 inches, the heaviest on record. The rains washed out portions of the newly completed railroad and repairs were finished in 1885. In 1886 Sweetwater Dam work was started and finished in 1888. Chinese workers stayed in the valley and farmed vegetables and fruit up until the flood of 1916. (6)

Part II, in the next issue of the Bulletin, will focus on the Chinese in the South Bay.

NOTES:

1. Lee, Murray K. In Search of Gold Mountain; A History Of The Chinese In San Diego, California. Donning Company Publishers, Virginia Beach, Va. 2011 pp. 17, 55, 84.
2. McEvoy, Arthur F., “In Places Men Reject Chinese Fishermen At San Diego, 1870-1893,” The Journal of San Diego History 23 (Fall 1977).
3. Bowen, Will, " Ah Quin: A San Diego founding father," San Diego Downtown News, posted March 1, 2014.
4. “Chinese immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts,” Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1866/chinese-immigration> .
5. MacPhail, Elizabeth, “San Diego’s Chinese Mission,” The Journal of San Diego History 23 (Spring 1977)
6. Sweetwater Valley Timeline, Bonita Museum.



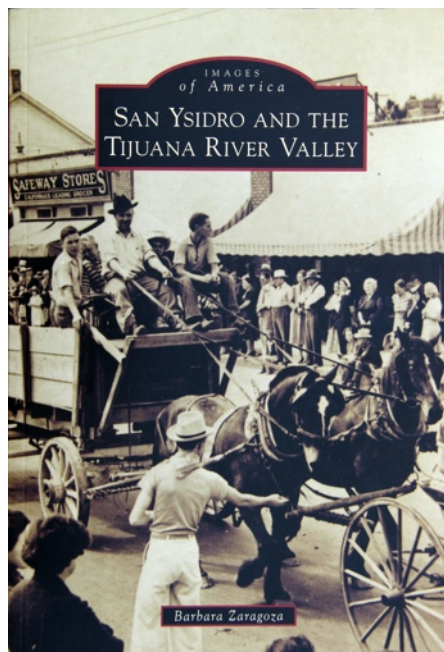
This photo from about 1881 shows Chinese working on the California Southern Railroad being built from National City north to Barstow.

LEARN MORE

The National City Depot has a collection of books and magazines that include histories of the South Bay railroads: Irene Phillips, *The Railroad Story of San Diego County*, 1956; Richard Dodge, *The California Southern Railroad: A Rail Drama of the Southwest*, 1959. Robert Hanft, *San Diego & Arizona: the Impossible Railroad*, 1984; Ralph Forty, *San Diego's South Bay Interurban*, 1987; Brian Solomon, *Southern Pacific Railroad*, 1999. James Price, "The Railroad Stations of San Diego County: Then and Now," Price & Sieber: San Diego CA, 1988, is in the Rojas Local History Room of the Chula Vista Public Library. For the history of the Chinese in San Diego, see Murray K. Lee, *In Search of Gold Mountain; A History Of The Chinese In San Diego, California*. Donning Company Publishers, Virginia Beach, VA: 2011.



NEWS



The new history book *San Ysidro and the Tijuana River Valley* by Barbara Zaragoza, a member of the South Bay Historical Society, is available online or at the Tijuana Estuary Visitor Center.

EVENTS

We have planned the following dates for the rest of 2014. This year, our regular meetings are held in the Auditorium of the Chula Vista Main Library, Monday evenings at 6:00.

July 27. Field trip. National City Train Depot, Sunday 2 pm. If you can make it, we will meet for lunch at the Pier 32 Waterfront Grill, 3201 Marina Way.

July 30. Steve Schoenherr will speak on South Bay history at the meeting of the Southwest Civic Association in the MAAC Community Room, 1387 Third Ave., 6:30-8:30 pm.

August 18. Field Trip. San Diego Downtown Library, 1 pm, with

Rick Crawford in the California Room on the 9th floor.

September 29. Open discussion, moderated by Susan Walter.

November 17. Speaker: Dr. Floyd Larry Wergeland, a retired ophthalmologist who has been involved with the Nature Center since 1996 as a docent and then he helped build the Aviary Support Building and the Wergeland Shark and Ray Exhibit and Discovery Center.

Join us at Harborfest on Saturday, August 16, from 11 am to 8 pm. We will be sharing the booth with Harry Orgovan's Chula Vista Kayak at Bayside Park in Chula Vista. See the event website at <http://www.cvharborfest.com/>



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Bulletin No. 4, July 2014
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