

ALL ABOARD... THE OJAI EXPRESS

Railroad Comes in 1898; Plays Key Role in Shaping Ojai

F By Holly Roberts

For 150 years, Ojai citizens and visitors have perpetually promoted this spectacular valley — filled with natural hot springs, unparalleled vistas of valleys dotted with live oaks, surrounded by the Los Padres National Forest. Its allure and tranquility has been touted from New York to India by artists, intellectuals and educators.



Photo courtesy of
Museum of Ventura County



The new trail bridge over San Antonio Creek crosses in the same spot as the railroad.

Photo by Holly Roberts

Whether walking or riding leisurely along the open, winding Ojai Valley Bike and Horse Trail (OVBH), even with kids in tow, it's easy to forget life's pressing concerns and allow oneself to be drawn along through an array of natural wonders.

You may not even realize that the 9.4 miles of asphalt/wood chip bridle path actually follows the course of the historic Ventura & Ojai Valley Rail Road, which made its grand debut in March, 1898 at a time when 1,100 Nordhoff residents received mail at the town post office. (Nordhoff became Ojai in 1917)

How the railroad became the horse and bike trail is really a story of citizen participation, activism and forethought, first in building the railroad, then in converting it to the trail 90 years later.

The advent of the railroad in Ventura County inspired a population boom and attracted business interests. It was an instrument of 'progress' which influenced both the physical and political landscape of the Ojai Valley. Its possibility mobilized the citizens to take a stand either for or against it — to promote Ojai's agriculture and health resources or to keep the valley a hidden secret, accessible only from the coast by horse. Could the valley make progress and still remain quaint and secluded?

In 1898, Nordhoff was a small agricultural village with orange, olive and apricot ranches, hot springs, prep schools and educated citizens keen for a closer connection with the wider world.

Local writer and Ojai historian, Patricia Clark Doerner, whose great-uncle, Tom Clark, opened Clark Livery Stables in Nordhoff in 1895, where today's Ojai Post Office stands, said that the Tallyho or open air stage coach used a team of four horses for the trip to Ventura and six horses on the return trip.

The 'mudwagons' followed the hard-packed dirt Creek Road and crisscrossed San Antonio Creek anywhere between 12 and 22 times carrying travelers or goods. It took them about two hours down and 2.5 hours on the return uphill drive. The only road from Nordhoff to the coast followed the San Antonio Creek and Ventura River, much as the train and trail did later.

Third-generation local, Tony Thacher, recently explained how in the early days of "The Ojai" tennis tournament, players rode by horseback or stage the 15 miles from Ventura, played for three or four hours and then rode home. Just the commute took four hours each way.

By April 23, 1898, the train brought people from Los Angeles and Santa Barbara to watch the "second and last day of the great tennis tournament between the champions of North and South in the Ojai Valley." In one of the matches, W.L. Thacher (south) defeated R.N. Whitney (north), 8-6, 6-3.

Stages were the only way for the valley citrus growers, a primary agricultural crop then and now, to get their crop to market as well.

"Ann's grandfather used to take the horse and buggy down to the Ventura Pier and put fruit on the pier to be shipped. The railroad was certainly vital to the citrus industry." (Tony Thacher refers to wife, Ann Friend Thacher of Ojai's Friend's Ranch)

Years later, in the late 1940s, when Ann Friend Thacher was a child, and her father was one of the citrus growers and members of the Ojai Orange Association, she remembers missing a wonderful opportunity to ride the train.

"I was at the packing house with my father when I was 6 or 7 years old. The train was there and the engineer offered me a ride in the engine and I didn't do it. I turned it down and have regretted it ever since," said.

The Ojai Orange Association Packing house stood on Bryant Street at the end of the rail line where Condor Self Storage is today.

It took years of talking about the possibility of a railroad to Nordhoff — articles in the local papers, organization of committees to promote it, gathering the funding and finally to convince Southern Pacific Railroad to add it to their Ventura County region. Though not even then was every citizen convinced that the 'iron horse' would improve their rural lifestyle.

"It makes me sad to write that this choice retreat (Nordhoff) is to be speedily invaded by that destroyer of peace, natural beauty and human simplicity — the American railroad," read excerpts from a letter to the *New York Observer* reprinted in *The Ojai*, April 16, 1898.

The majority of residents, however, felt that it would prove a valuable cultural and economic connection to the outside world.

"Now jump right in neighbor. Let the outside world know what treasures you have hidden in the cañons and foothills. Tell of the Matilija and its hot springs, the Nordhoff district and its possibilities, and the hard work to secure your railroad will be paid for a thousand times and more," an editorial stated in the *The Ojai*, March, 1898.

Southern Pacific Railroad Company completed its spur line from Saugus to Ventura in 1887 when Ventura County had only 5,000 residents. Real estate prices immediately soared. Ventura's population soon doubled.

It was the railroad which first shortened the city's official name from San Buenaventura to Ventura to fit it on their timetables, and the name stuck. Round-trip tickets from Ventura to Los Angeles were \$5 per person. (*Ventura County Star-Free Press* Sept. 4, 1966)

It took another 11 years to make the railroad dream a reality in the Ojai. Two competing railroad companies surveyed a potential rail course into Nordhoff, including the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. A group of Ventura businessmen considered building a narrow-gauge railroad from Ventura to Ojai as an extension of the existing electric car line on Main Street. As early as 1891, Nordhoff citizens, including Edward S. Thacher, began to organize and raise funds in anticipation of encouraging a narrow-gauge spur line into the Ojai. Nothing concrete happened until 1897.

Ultimately, Captain John Cross, who was responsible for building railroads in Los Angeles, Pasadena, Glendale and the Santa Barbara street railway, agreed to oversee the building of a new standard gauge railroad into Nordhoff. He would be paid \$6,000 per mile. He signed a contract with Grant Brothers Grading to start construction August 15, 1897. The railroad paid Chinese laborers 90 cents a day at that time.

Incorporators of the Ventura & Ojai Valley Railroad Company were seven Los Angeles men, including John Cross, two Cross family members and S.R. Thorpe.

There were six original stations along the Ojai Railroad starting at the Nordhoff Depot at the end of Fox Street, Matilija (Grant's Station

near Highway 33 and Highway 150 was the Summit), Tico (Mirror Lake near Woodland Avenue), Oak View (near Devil's Gulch), La Cross (confluence of rivers near Rancho Arnaz and where the new bike bridge is today) and the Casitas (Canet) station near Foster Park.

As a child in the 1940s, Patricia Clark Doerner played with her cousin, Arlene or 'Punky' Peirano, in the river bottom near the train tracks.

"One day we covered our faces with dirt and we were wearing striped shirts and gunny sacks on over those. We were whooping at the train when the engineer blew the whistle. We were sure that he was afraid of us!"

In 1897, most valley ranchers were happy to provide the right-of-way necessary to develop a railway, but several condemnation suits were filed by land owners, with one going to the California Supreme Court. After about a year's effort and with \$40,000 in bonds for the construction sold by the Ojai committee, 79 parcels of land were finally conveyed to the Ventura & Ojai Valley Rail Road Company in August, 1897. It was not an easy feat then and can hardly be imagined today.

According to David Myrick, historian/writer for the Ventura County Historical Society, Cross persuaded Southern Pacific to supply him with secondhand rails, ties and rolling stock to get the project going. Cross contracted with Grant Brothers Grading for \$21,000, plus \$15,000 of the railroad's 6 percent bonds to begin the project.

Railroad workers and 95 mules arrived at the Goodyear Place (Rancho Arnaz) and grading began at the most difficult part of the line — Devil's Slide (later called Devil's Gulch) in Oak View. Cross began grading at this most difficult section (2.71 percent grade) of the line in order to allow the surveyors time to mark

the other locations.

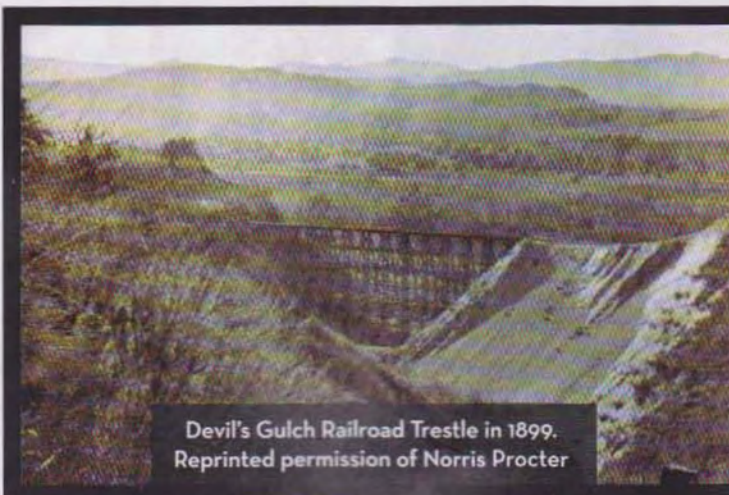
The Grant Brothers used up more than 20 tons of giant powder and dynamite on the steepest grade in Oak View, where today's bike/horse trail separates from Highway 33 and allows for some of the most spectacular and far-reaching views of the surrounding rural valley and river below.

"Its grade, heavy as the heaviest, and its bridges, in span and height — one of them is eighty-nine feet above the stream it span ... now overcome. As a scenic road, it is second to none in the world." (*The Ojai*, 1898)

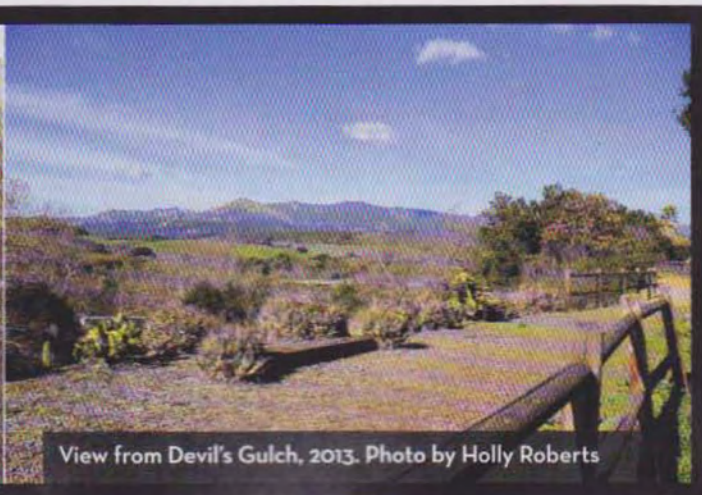
Except for a two-mile stretch between the San Antonio Creek crossing and Devil's Gulch and the Ojai entry, the future State Highway 33 paralleled the railroad," wrote David Myrick in a centennial history of railroads in Ventura County published in 1988. Excitement continued in anticipation of the railroad's arrival. The Ojai predicted a high turnout of people from all over the county for the arrival of the first passenger train. Railroad promoters continued to shout their wares: "Let us begin to thrill and get up a tremor for the Ventura and Ojai Valley Railroad! It is a ripping good thing for the section and we should give it a howling reception," wrote one eager person in *The Ojai* on Feb 19, 1898.

In response to a letter to *The Ojai* in 1898 from a curious young girl who asked — "Does it (locomotive) look like an elephant?"

"Dear Lil: — You will be safe in coming over to look at the engine, provided you do not look it in the eye when it is running ... The railroad engine is a mighty monster and runs on two steel rails. It is very long, you see — so much so that is sometimes called a locomotive "for short." It is not afraid of the dark, and chases up and down the track by day and by night."



Devil's Gulch Railroad Trestle in 1899. Reprinted permission of Norris Procter



View from Devil's Gulch, 2013. Photo by Holly Roberts

Alan Rains, whose grandfather Hickey came to Ojai (then Nordhoff) in 1914, remembers waving at the conductor of the freight trains going through Ojai as a regular part of his life as a young boy in the 1940s.

"I remember taking probably a penny because in those days you could buy something with a penny. I remember putting it on the railroad track (behind Libbey Park) so it would run over it. I kept that penny for years and years."

The end of the Ventura and Ojai line was finally completed at noon on Feb. 24, 1898. It started raining at 1 p.m. and the crew had to quickly move to Mirror Lake (Mira Monte near Woodland Avenue) to make ditches and trenches to drain and carry the water away from the track. (Myrick, D.)

The timing of the rain after the last spike was driven perhaps foretold the future of the line, where rain storms and repeated floods played an integral role in why the railroad was initially built, but also why it was ultimately abandoned as well.

The Nordhoff depot construction began two weeks later. It was to be 16x40 feet and 14 feet to the ceiling and used as a combination freight and passenger structure made of redwood. Freight included oranges, wines, hay, and olives from Nordhoff station. Other stations also shipped wood, along with rock from the brownstone quarry. The train also carried from between five and 20 passengers regularly.

The depot stood at the end of Fox Street where the Ojai Valley Athletic Club parking lot is today. The same giant eucalyptus tree, which shaded the eastern end of the depot, still stands sentry while cars circle its base.

Ojai historian and writer, David Mason, was born on Fox Street, four houses away from the Ojai Depot, and remembers the train being part of the background fabric of the town and occasionally playing under the train trestle where the line crossed the river. Mason recalls how both he and his mother graduated from San Antonio School on Carne Road.

"There were two kids in her class. There were five in mine. One of them (Freida Lee Mock) won an Academy Award a few years ago. I keep telling everybody that 20 percent of my class won Academy awards."

The train turntables were built in the open space in front of the depot and, though they fell into disrepair after the passenger service ended in the 1930s, several locals still remember them.

a reality

The Ventura Band met the first train at the Matilija Junction (Fox Street) on March 12, 1898. The first load of freight had arrived the previous day.

"Jubilation was in order yesterday. It was the birthday of the Ventura and Ojai Valley Railroad, and everybody from far and near turned out to welcome the first train as it thundered through the valley and panted heavily up the steep grades. Clouds of black smoke stained the clear air, and the roar of iron grinding against iron as the wheels scraped acquaintance with the new track sounded strangely out of place in the quiet grove of oaks ... this new railroad means closer connection with the outside world; an easier market for the abundant crops of fruit, and the development of the most beautiful valley in Southern California into a popular resort for seekers of health and pleasure." (Excerpt from Los Angeles Times, reprinted in The Ojai, March 19, 1898)

The 1898 Ventura and Ojai Valley Rail Road Time Table initially offered two daily trips and later reduced it to once daily and then by 1910, it fell to Sundays only. The regular fare was 60 cents. Round trip fare was \$1. The Excursion rate (Sundays) was 75 cents.

Along with the new railroad coming in 1898, there was talk of the Sunset Telephone and Telegraph Company beginning an extension of a long distance system to Mr. Thacher's School in Nordhoff.

Nordhoff and then Ojai citizens had many names for its life-line locomotive, "The Cannonball," "The Hummingbird," "The Ojai Buzzard," and "The Ojai Lark," among others.

Carl Greenfield, 96, Ojai local since 1948, said, "We used to call 'the train' the 'Ojai Flyer.' You could hear the whistle occasionally at the crossings." Carl recalled a time when he and his wife watched a play at the Art Center when suddenly a train went past outside and the engineer roared the whistle a couple of times.

"First the 'actors' on stage were silent and then one of them made some sort of a quip that 'this must be Ojai' and everybody laughed. The tracks ran right there in back of the Art Center. The noise was amazing."

The old 'Ojai Lark' locomotive had a bronze bell which the engineer would ring at the various crossings, stations and probably at stray animals who wandered across the tracks. Patricia Clark Doerner explained that sometime in the 1940s, this bell fell off the Ojai train into a field in the river bottom along

the Oak View stretch of the route near the Peirano Family ranch (Rancho Velenada).

Lester Peirano, rancher and brother to Nick Peirano, who was married to Patricia's Aunt Ruby, happened upon the bell one day out on the range. He assumed that nobody wanted it back because no one ever came looking for it. The Peirano family hung it up and rang it at mealtimes to alert the ranch hands for dinner.

The 'Peirano bell,' solid bronze (approx. 18 inches high by 2 feet at its base) and weighing more than 150 pounds, was recently purchased by Clark Doerner when her cousin, Tony Peirano, passed away. Tarnished green from its long journey through time and harking from Darby, Montana, the bell takes a brief respite in Doerner's garage at Rancho Cielo, high above Creek Road, the road her grandfather built. It has come home to Ojai and may yet one day hang for service near one of the former Ojai stations to commemorate the history of the railroad.

Unfortunately, the Ojai Depot near David Mason's birthplace was torn down in the early 1970s once the freight rail service ended. The turntables which Tony Thacher said looked like a water tank sunk into the ground, became dilapidated soon after the passenger service ended in the 1930s.

Chris Danch, another long time Ojai local, said that when he was a kid in the 1960s, "I used to go down on my bike and look at the turn table. I remember seeing the short trains with maybe 3 to 6 cars and a caboose. It was all open back then and you could walk around it and climb on the caboose. It was great."

Trouble with Floods

Without any sort of flood control in place, the trip could be treacherous particularly through the Foster Park and Casitas Springs area which was called 'Stony Flats,' and then La Crosse. The Ventura River and San Antonio Creek converge at this point and with significant rain storms the water would overflow the river banks causing all kinds of havoc.

Once the railroad was built, portions of the track continually washed out in storms at least 12 times between 1901 and 1952 alone.

The 1914 floods were the worst in 30 years with an 8-inch rainfall recorded. Nine lengths of track were gone near Ventura River and another five lengths at La Crosse where the small depot disappeared. It took 250 men to repair track over 8 days. They had a beef barbecue at Nordhoff station to celebrate the workers — Thacher School boys served the meal dressed as vaqueros. On Feb. 17, a week after the barbecue, another big storm came



Clockwise from top left: The Ojai Railroad Depot taken in 1956. (Photo reprinted with permission from Joseph Shine, Four Ways West Publications). An orange crate packing label from the 1920s (courtesy of Patricia Clark Doerner). Lester Peirano, who found the "Ojai Lark" locomotive's bell. (Photo courtesy of Patricia Clark Do-

erner). The Ojai locomotive taking on water at the Fox Street crossing. (Photo reprinted with permission of the Museum of Ventura County). A photo by Holly Roberts of the Ojai Trail between Casitas Springs and Oak View. The "Ojai Lark" locomotive bell, in the possession of the Clark family, by way of Darby, Montana.

with 12 inches of rain (season total to 37 inches)—and wiped out the Matilija schoolhouse. There were 19 days without train service again, wrote David Myrick in the *Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly*.

Decline and Abandonment

In 1910, an increased use of autos caused SPRR to end their regular passenger trains into the valley. Special excursion trains would continue until 1968 and special supply trains ran during both World War I and World War II.

In World War II, special trains brought soldiers to convalesce at a camp at the Ojai Valley Inn. Greenfield recalls that although he wasn't living in Ojai during the war, others "told me that there were tents and as a result there were a number of Ojai gals who married the soldiers."

Ojai Depot handled Railway Express, freight, railroad tickets and Western Union telegrams. In 1953, the agency handled 6,052 telegrams. SP proposed to abandon the Ojai railway depot and telegraph office on Fox Street for economic reasons, according to *The Ojai* in 1956.

Stan Kistler, photographer and member of the Southern California Railway Club, accompanied 99 other train enthusiasts on one of the final steam engine excursions up the Ventura/Ojai Line in 1954. The train departed Los Angeles with Ojai as its destination. They picked up a second engine in Ventura in order to be able to get back down from the valley because the Ojai turntables were too dilapidated by then.

The following year, Stan followed the excursion by car to take photos. He took the photos of the train going up and then down Devil's Gulch from Highway 33 in May of 1955, the last time a steam engine passenger train went up the Ojai line. The water tank which serviced the Ojai depot was scheduled for demolition shortly after this final steam engine trip.

By the 1940s, the Ventura/Ojai Railroad primarily ran freight and served the Ojai Orange Association.

David Bender, Sr., Ojai local since 1964, remembers when the train came to Ojai to pick up oranges. "My observations were that the train crew would park the train (locomotive and maybe one car) near the restaurant at the 'Y' (Vons) usually around 5 p.m. Two guys on the train crew would

walk across the road there and go have dinner. I remember seeing that and thought that was kind of neat."

The days of seeing even Ojai's freight train roll slowly through the valley next to the more modern Highway 33 were almost at an end, but not before one final hurrah.

On Saturday, October 12, 1968, 425 railroad buffs from Los Angeles (Glendale) took the "Ojai Limited," an excursion train sponsored by the Orange Empire Trolley Museum in Perris, California for \$16.50 per passenger.

"The Nordhoff High Pep squad met the train in Ventura and distributed box lunches and a case of Ojai oranges courtesy of the Ojai Orange Association. Pep squad rode with train to Ojai pointing out interesting sights along the way. In Oak View the Lions Club will climb aboard and distribute apples from Rancho Arnaz," it was written in an October 1968 issue of *The Ojai Valley News*.

The train route went through Van Nuys, Canoga Park, Chatsworth, the Santa Susanna pass in Oxnard to Ventura and finally Ojai.

Sponsors are quoted in *The Ojai* — "In the twilight of rail passenger service in Southern California, the Southern Pacific has agreed to operate, possibly for the last time, a trip on the Ojai Branch and the Burbank branch. It has been a decade since an excursion train has run on either of these branches and both have been among the most requested trips."

Just three months later, in January, 1969, huge storms caused flooding throughout the valley. The rain began on Friday, Jan. 17 and parts of the valley were flooded by Sunday, with a second storm around the corner. The rain total for that winter was 46.6 inches where the annual average was only 20 inches. The Ojai Valley received 40 inches of rain within a two-week period that January.

The same storm caused six Boy Scouts, their adult leader from Canoga Park and their three rescuers on a bulldozer, to be swept away while trying to cross a swollen Sespe Creek in the Piedra Blanca area of the Ventura back country.

The floods washed out the railroad trestle at San Antonio Creek/Ventura River junction (La Cross). The estimated cost to rebuild was \$350,000, with normal annual operating losses of \$55,000. The Ojai Orange Association, the line's only customer at the

time, was in no position to subsidize the repairs. In 1909, the Ojai Orange Association shipped about 400 cars a year (61 percent of its products) by railroad to the East Coast, while trucks transported the citrus in the western states, according to Myrick.

The Southern Pacific Railroad offered to buy the Ojai Orange Association's packing house for \$550,000 and then the SPRR filed a formal application to abandon upper portion of the Ventura-Ojai route in September of 1969. In October, members of the OOA moved their operation to Somis (now the Ojai-Tapo Citrus Association) and divided the proceeds of the sale among the 120 members.

"When you think back on 1914 Ojai, there was nothing but little Creek Road and the stage coach had to come up and over the river in several places. There was always a washout or something. The train was really a blessing to the valley. It would probably still be in service if it hadn't been for the floods in 1969," said Alan Rains.

The 9.4 miles of track which would later become the Ojai Valley Bike/Horse Trail were abandoned by the SPRR Dec. 31, 1969. The remaining 5 miles of line continued to serve the petrochemical industry along Ventura Avenue until the fall of 1987 when part of this line was also washed out.

The Ojai railroad tracks faded into the scenery for decades before locals began to consider what to do with the right-of-way. The land was narrow and ran approximately 10 miles from downtown Ojai all the way to Foster Park in Casitas Springs. It would take a galvanized public movement to once again creatively approach the issue and move toward converting the line into yet another asset for the Ojai Valley.

Even though over 90 years passed and the Ojai Valley grew considerably, the age-old dichotomy of whether to use the right-of-way for 'progress' or pleasure had not changed in 1987 when the old Ojai Railroad line was up for grabs.

"The three legs of what drives Ojai — tourism, schools and agriculture — hasn't changed all that much. A lot of the first people came here to farm. They came for their health, the hot springs. Both private and public school systems are still a vital part of this valley. Other than that we're a bedroom community for the coast," said Tony Thacher. ●