

The Sacramento Valley Railroad: A Troubled Historiography

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The Sacramento Valley Railroad was California's first. Its rails transformed transportation in the Sacramento area and sought to do much more than that. But this important and controversial infrastructure has barely been studied. Its historiography is intermittent and incoherent. The present study has not revealed a single monograph about the Sacramento Valley Railroad itself. Academic works about SVRR are rare, including only two masters' theses and an undergraduate paper. The first serious and focused research did not occur until James Campilio's 1934 paper – almost 70 years after the Central Pacific Railroad acquired the SVRR and reduced it to a spur for the western end of its transcontinental line. These papers are joined by handful of unreviewed journal articles, a chapter in a popular-issue book, and a pair of published booklets. The following historiographic essay must therefore consider works for which the SVRR is not the primary subject, as well as works of varying quality in a variety of settings.

This historiography looks beyond the 22-mile railroad that was completed in 1856. It is true that the SVRR was originally intended to reach Marysville along the base of the Sierra Nevada foothills, but failed to pass Folsom. However, this partial success provided a hub for the development of four additional railroads with overlapping ownership and joint operations. While this study does not attempt a combined historiography for the entire network, I do note when sources refer to other railroads in this Folsom network. The Freeport Railroad's close and dependent relationship with the SVRR requires especially close attention.

These secondary works might not ordinarily be featured in historiographic essays. But as we shall see, this is no ordinary historiography. Our memory of the SVRR is dominated by a narrative that is poorly supported by fact. In what I call the "first link" narrative, the SVRR is vaguely foundational to the Central Pacific (CP), but the former's incorporation into the latter remains vague, distorted or even unmentioned. Very occasionally – a handful of times over the

past century – a writer has wrestled with the contradictions of this first link narrative. However, a more factual “captured competitor” narrative has struggled to take root in thin soil. Decades have passed without anyone writing specifically about this pioneer transportation system. And during those awkward lulls in the conversation, historians have repeatedly lost momentum towards a more accurate understanding. The first link narrative has thus held on tenaciously, appearing even in recent scholarship on Sacramento’s environmental history.

As we’ll see, the broader historiography of Sacramento development is impoverished by profound ignorance of the SVRR. Likewise the dramatic and well-known struggle to build the transcontinental railroad. This paper cannot attempt to discern the aggregate motivations of historians who wrote – or decided against writing – histories of the SVRR and the Folsom rail network. But the extremely sparse and intermittent literature suggests that the otherwise prolific chroniclers of early Western railroads thought it best to stay off the tracks of the SVRR. As we shall see, writers have occasionally wondered why this rich story has mostly remained untold. Yet close to a century after Campilio noted a curious lack of research, historians’ aggregate grasp of this important topic has barely improved.

What Happened?

Sources differ on many details, but historians have generally agreed on the following: The Sacramento Valley Railroad profoundly impacted the Sacramento region once it began service between Sacramento and Folsom in 1856. This was the first commercial railroad west of the Mississippi River. Its rails revolutionized shipping between the Sacramento River and the mines, which were at that time transforming from the picturesque free-for-all of ‘49er lore to more centralized and industrialized methods: hydraulic and hard rock mining. The massive freight still needed to support the waning Gold Rush could now bypass Sacramento City.

Although roads to the gold traversed fairly flat country, they were sometimes impassable from floods and always plagued by mud and dust. So the new rails decimated Sacramento's shipping industry, as most teamsters relocated to the new railhead at Folsom.

Although it succeeded operationally, the SVRR always struggled financially. It was organized during an economic crash, and carried a very heavy debt burden. The railroad became the property of unpaid contractors before it even opened. Adding to the SVRR's troubles, the Sacramento City business community fought fiercely to block its river access. Additional rail companies were organized – with varying levels of success – to reach Placerville, Auburn and Nevada City. Community relations eventually grew so poisonous that the SVRR attempted to bypass Sacramento City altogether, launching a new venture connecting Freeport to the SVRR at Perkins. The SVRR and its sisters would eventually be absorbed into the CPRR.

Mapping Out the SVRR

Business ventures rarely turn out exactly as envisioned – especially when they launch into an economic environment as difficult as 1850s California. Nevertheless, the Sacramento Valley Railroad's design provides important insights into how its founders hoped the story might unfold. The SVRR's story was first told cartographically in 1854, by Theodore Judah's *Map of the Sacramento Valley Railroad*. This map paints a very different picture than many later historians would paint. Judah depicts rails connecting the Sacramento River with Negro Bar (later called Folsom). En route to Folsom, the SVRR would serve Sacramento City as well as an American River community called Brighton. Thence a road runs southwesterly, feeding in from Sutterville on the Sacramento River. Other long-forgotten settlements punctuated the line, including St. Louis House and Patterson's. The rails run parallel to existing roads from

Sacramento City toward the Gold Country.¹ Although its downhill terminus was indeed Sacramento City, the SVRR would gather passengers and cargo from a stretch of riverfronts.

Judah's map depicts an entirely different transportation network than modern Sacramento knows. If it had succeeded, the SVRR would have supported different development patterns than those that actually occurred. The SVRR's vision thus raises questions about how else the Sacramento region might have turned out. Could Folsom have eclipsed Sacramento City? There is a lot of grist for the historic mill. But decades would pass before anyone discussed what the SVRR envisioned and what it lost. In lieu of any surviving works specifically about the SVRR, two relatively brief treatments lead us through this historiography's first half century.

For nearly 60 years, the SVRR made modest appearances in general histories of California and of Sacramento. The "first link" narrative appears in two representative local histories, revealing that a static and confused narrative persisted for decades: Thomas Thompson and Albert West provided a few highlights as part of a chapter on local railroads in their 1880 *History of Sacramento County* – probably the best known of early local histories. Then, in 1923, Walter Reed followed closely in their footsteps. Both of these histories generally follow the first link narrative. They also include buried details that seriously subvert it.

Thompson & West introduce the SVRR indirectly, in a way that clearly subordinates it to the CP. They begin with "the first effort," at California railroading, the Sacramento, Auburn and Nevada Railroad – about which they provide a list of its founders as well as its planned route and prohibitive cost. The SVRR, in contrast, first appears near the end of the following paragraph, at which point we learn only that the transcontinental route was discovered by Judah "while engaged in building this road." The subsequent paragraph launches into Judah's biography, en

¹ Theodore Judah, *Map of the Sacramento Valley Railroad*, 1854.

route to railroad politics and the CP.² Four pages in, the authors finally return to the SVRR, which they note later “had some little trouble with its finances” despite “being a very profitable (road) from the date of its completion.” The narrative then jumps forward a decade to record the CP purchase. It seems that the Big Four “had been forced to do this in order to secure the whole of the Washoe trade.” They wanted monopoly. Thompson & West bury this big truth, deeply.³

Reed’s *History of Sacramento County, California* tracks closely with Thompson & West. In fact, he substantially plagiarizes their work. Reed solidifies and expands their narrative while quietly repeating many subversive details. He also adds some contradictory framing. Reed’s chapter on railroads begins with a section called “The Building of the Central Pacific.” Having apparently reduced the SVRR to a phase of construction, Reed then abruptly credits the SVRR as “the direct cause” of the western portion of the transcontinental effort. But after this strong claim of importance, the SVRR mostly disappears from his view.

Reed briefly tends to early lawmaking. Then he gives a short account of the Sacramento, Auburn & Nevada Railroad, survey legislation and Judah’s arrival. Here he plagiarizes large swaths of Thompson & West, with light paraphrasing. The story, briefly told, ends in failure as the proposed route to Nevada City and beyond proved infeasible. We might at this point expect an account of the SVRR’s subsequent success, but Reed turns to the transcontinental survey, acknowledging only that it was done by the SVRR chief engineer – without any discussion of the railroad that brought him west and positioned him for this work.⁴ We should at this point remember that Reed began by calling the CP a direct result of Judah’s first California project.

² Thomas H. Thompson and Albert Augustus West, *History of Sacramento County California*, (1880. Reprint, Berkeley: Howell-North, 1960), 196.

³ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴ Walter G. Reed, *History of Sacramento County, California* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Co, 1923), 237-8.

Reed then devotes about five pages to the CPRR before a subhead promising attention to “Other Railroads.” Once again the SVRR is shunted aside. This chaotic section begins with the 1862 Western Pacific, then turns to the California Pacific a few years later. Eventually Reed returns to the 1850s, giving the SVRR a couple of paragraphs leading up to its acquisition. Here Reed again plagiarizes Thompson & West, including the excuse that the CP was “forced to” buy the SVRR.⁵ Although Reed captures elements of the CP’s prolonged hostile takeover of the Folsom network, his contradictory account fails to shed much light on the matter.

Despite Reed’s loose ends, the first link narrative remained dominant until at least 1928, when *The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin* published D.L. Joslyn’s article, “The Beginning of S.P.” This eight-page piece in a highly specialized journal offers only a single sentence about the oldest rail laid in California. The SVRR was “the first road to operate in the West.” That is all. Joslyn also provides a few brief remarks about the SVRR’s sister roads and their absorption into the CP⁶. Joslyn does not mention Theodore Judah.

“Quite Overlooked”

Finally, in 1934, a scholar engaged with the SVRR. James John Campilio authored a masters thesis called *A History of the Sacramento Valley Railroad Up To 1865*. He opens by observing that the SVRR had been ignored by historians, despite its massive significance to the region and nation. He then claims that this pioneer infrastructure had been overshadowed by the CPRR, which “began to remove competition.” And he turns the first link narrative on its head: “Let us bear in mind that the Central Pacific Railroad was merely a link, though a very important

⁵ Ibid., 244-5.

⁶ D. L. Joslyn, “The Beginning of S. P.,” *The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 17 (October 1928): w47.

one, in the chain of the transcontinental road.”⁷ Campilio explicitly encourages similar research on other early railroad efforts. And he also raises quite a few research questions, both implicit and explicit: What sort of lobbying led to the “modifications” of state railroad law to create a less “stringent” legal environment? Who might have been opposed? Unfortunately, it would be two decades before another scholar followed his line of inquiry.

This is not to say that the conversation fell totally silent. In 1939, D.L. Joslyn produced another article for the *R&LHS Bulletin*. In the decade since his prior contribution, Joslyn had grown more interested in the SVRR. In “The Romance of the Railroads Entering Sacramento,” he emphasizes that railroad’s effect on Sacramento, even mentioning it in his general historic introduction to Sacramento. He notes that Sacramento “suffered” from the resulting move of shipping operations to Folsom. But with the arrival of CP and its shops “the city took on new life.”⁸ Joslyn’s account closes by acknowledging that the CPRR’s agent Bragg bought the SVRR, after which the Freeport tracks were removed.⁹ Although events surrounding the acquisition remain uncertain, Joslyn makes clear that the company’s failure stemmed from something beyond simple economics. Joslyn looks at railroads in general, but the SVRR stands out – it receives roughly the same page count as the CP. However, his even-handed attention is undermined by an editorial decision by the *Bulletin*: The SVRR portion of the text is interspersed with images from CP history – none of which have any connection to the SVRR.

Although not focused on the SVRR in particular, Joslyn nevertheless took the baton from Campilio and pressed into some of the questions that Campilio had raised. But just as momentum was building, the historiography came uncoupled again. In 1941 Gilbert Kneiss produced a

⁷ James John Campilio, “A History of the Sacramento Valley Railroad Up To 1865” (MA thesis, University of Southern California, 1934), 2.

⁸ D. L. Joslyn, “The Romance of the Railroads Entering Sacramento,” *The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 48 (March 1939): 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

popularized (and extravagantly plagiarized) account as the opening chapter of his book *Bonanza Railroads*. Kneiss neglects to explain how or why the SVRR met its end. Instead, he concludes with the strange and apparently ahistoric claim that Bragg's purchase left him as a powerless figurehead with the old owners still somehow in control.¹⁰ It would be another decade before anyone tried to untangle the worsening knots of SVRR history.

The Centennial Period

As the SVRR's centennial approached, a pair of Sac State grad students took interest. In 1954, Robert O. Briggs completed *The Sacramento Valley Railroad 1853-1865*, while Wayne W. Roberts produced *A History of Early Folsom, California, From 1842-1862*. Although neither cited the other, both conducted their research at the same time at the same school, approved by the same committee members. Both papers laid the groundwork for the captured competitor narrative, without explicitly claiming it. Briggs and Roberts each later adapted their work for the *Golden Notes* journal, which suggests that their work had sparked some curiosity at the Sacramento County Historical Society. Finally, Briggs contributed a piece to *Western Railroader* in 1957. Together Briggs and Roberts contributed most of the relevant work during the 1950s; the only other known writing was a 1955 booklet by the Southern Pacific publicity shop. And as we shall see, both Briggs and Roberts retreated from their initial positions. A promising moment passed without establishing a more accurate understanding.

Briggs began this phase of the historiography with an understatement: Historians of the transcontinental railroad "have at times overlooked its important western prototype."¹¹ A few pages later his tact slips, as he bemoans that the SVRR, "so intimately connected with local

¹⁰Gilbert H. Kneiss, *Bonanza Railroads* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1941), 21.

¹¹Robert O. Briggs, "The Sacramento Valley Railroad 1853-1865" (MA thesis, Sacramento State College, 1954), 1.

geography and development, has suffered a shameful local neglect.”¹² He points out that the SVRR was first focused on California’s needs rather than the transcontinental vision, but also claims that Judah’s recruitment ironically made the greater vision possible.¹³ Briggs also raises a broader issue of historic neglect – that changing geography around Sacramento hampered his research. Despite at least a decade of rail service, many places on Judah’s map and SVRR timetables were gone or renamed.¹⁴ Briggs thereby subtly observes how dismantling a regional transportation system helped wipe out communities that sprang up along the rails.

Briggs gives detailed attention to the organization and construction of the railroad. And then he turns to the operational period, which he divides into two sections at the year 1860: First came “years marked with a growing dissatisfaction of citizens of Sacramento concerning railroad policy and operation.” The second half of the SVRR’s operation was marked by “close co-operation with two independent railroad companies to extend all their services.”¹⁵ This division highlights his understanding of the SVRR as something with a prolonged and changing impact. Unfortunately, Briggs does not clarify the SVRR’s demise. He recalls poor relations with Sacramento City as well as financial problems. But then, strangely, he jumps back to the contractors taking over – which occurred before operations even began in 1856. He then pivots to his postmortem: The Big Four learned from the mistakes of the SVRR and succeeded where their predecessors had failed. For all his attention to primary sources, Briggs cannot break free of the dominant narrative found in his secondary sources.¹⁶

Roberts’ *History of Early Folsom* features a chapter on the area’s role as a transportation center, much of which deals with the SVRR. Roberts recalls that its shops were not just

¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 67-8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90-2.

prominent structures in the new town of Folsom, but the workplace of up to 1,500 people – equivalent to a tenth of Sacramento’s entire 1860 population. He also describes the other railroads that connected to the Folsom network, before concluding his treatment. He declares the SVRR “a valuable asset to Northern California and the mines during its first few years of existence,” and also the basis for Folsom’s growth.¹⁷ Roberts does not discuss the end of the SVRR, as his paper covers only until 1862. Even so, his work adds significantly to the sparse body of knowledge regarding the SVRR and affirms the need for further study.

Restoring the Silence

But instead of sparking curiosity, Briggs and Roberts were followed by more neglect. So did Briggs and Roberts simply create some interesting research that was somehow overlooked and faded into obscurity? It appears not. As noted, both Briggs and Roberts went on to publish articles in *Golden Notes*, which suggests that the Sacramento history community took an interest in the SVRR. However, that interest was tightly constrained. *Golden Notes* is a small journal. Issues tend to contain perhaps a dozen folio pages. Adapting a 100-page thesis to this format obviously requires significant cuts. The publication chose to focus on construction with Briggs’ piece titled “Building the Sacramento Valley Railroad.” Such a decision suggests a second installment covering operations. Instead, the article concludes with a clear statement that there would be no sequel, as this was merely a failed project: His final paragraph addresses the company’s receivership and mistakes in cost estimation, which led to the decision to stop construction at Folsom. A final freestanding sentence slams shut the door to further dialogue: “Thus ends the story of California’s pioneer railroad, forerunner of the mighty Central Pacific.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Wayne Williams Roberts, “A History of Early Folsom, California, From 1842-1862” (MA thesis, Sacramento State College, 1954), 55-9. Population data from www.biggestuscities.com.

¹⁸ Robert O. Briggs, “Building the Sacramento Valley Railroad,” *Golden Notes* 1, no. 3 (January 1955): 6.

These words effectively recant the second half of Briggs' earlier work, without explanation. Two thesis chapters on the operations and impact on one of the West's most important infrastructure projects – more than half of his page count – was excised without public explanation.

The next voice heard in the conversation was none other than the Southern Pacific Railroad, successor to the CP. The company's Public Relations Department reduced the first railroad in the west to a link in the long transcontinental chain. With *First in the West: Sacramento Valley Railroad, of 100 years ago, is oldest link in SP's Western lines*, the pamphlet's title concedes the chronological high ground. But its lengthy subtitle promptly subordinates their rival's relevance. Precise dates are given for most events in the creation of the SVRR. But the timeline of decline is very murky; it receives less attention than the detailed account of the 1856 grand opening gala.¹⁹ A single paragraph summarizes the post-opening decade of operation, concluding that, "There was plenty of business but interest rates on indebtedness were staggering. A profitable operation seemed impossible." Bragg's arrival as president is noted, but his power seems limited by legacy ownership; apparently the SP copied Kneiss' dubious claim here. There is no mention of Bragg's later buyout or his handing the company over to Stanford. Oddly, the modern railroad's account contains no mention of how its predecessor acquired the SVRR, thereby omitting the entire connecting event that gave reason for this commemorative iteration of the first link narrative.²⁰

The Grand Opening Remembered

The following year, Roberts wrote a *Golden Notes* article that backed away from his thesis, focusing on just one event in Folsom history: "Centennial Celebration of the Sacramento

¹⁹ Public Relations Department, Southern Pacific Company, *First in the West: Sacramento Valley Railroad, of 100 years ago, is oldest link in SP's Western Lines*, (San Francisco: Public Relations Department, Southern Pacific Company, 1955), 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

Valley Railroad Inauguration Festivities February 22, 1856.” His substantial and serious academic work was reduced to a detailed account of the opening day festivities – an entertaining but inconsequential read. Although Roberts’ reduced view is not as clear as Briggs’ dramatic retreat a year earlier, he still conspicuously fails to provide for the relevance of the celebration. Without any discussion of the SVRR’s operations and impact, Roberts’ work is stripped of its connection to broader geographic and economic changes. Roberts does provide some hints of what was celebrated, but he raises more questions than he answers. And he reprints an announcement from the *Sacramento Union*, which hinted at a greater plan from the “first division of the Great Pacific Railroad.”²¹ But to anyone who hadn’t read Roberts’ original work, the grand opening is reduced to a wild party celebrating an event with no actual impact.

The centennial phase of the conversation began to wind down in 1957, when *Western Railroader* reprinted Briggs’ *Golden Notes* article. It was a strange choice, as this publication “for the Western Railfan” presumably held very high levels of interest in railroad operations. Although Briggs’ conclusion denied it, other layout decisions suggest that the editors knew there was more to the story: The piece was accompanied by a list of SVRR locomotives, along with a photo of one – which the caption informs, “blew up at Folsom.” The journal also included a 1920 map that captured remnants of the old Folsom network.²² Attentive readers must have been confused by Briggs’ assertion that the story ended with construction.

Starting Again

With Briggs and Roberts neutralized, another decade passed quietly. Then *Golden Notes* returned to the matter in 1963 – this time with better results. Walter Frame’s article, “First in the

²¹ Wayne Williams Roberts, “Centennial Celebration of the Sacramento Valley Railroad Inauguration Festivities February 22, 1856,” *Golden Notes* 2, no. 2 (January 1956): 2.

²² Robert O. Briggs, “The Sacramento Valley R.R.,” *The Western Railroader* 20, no. 12 (October 1957): 3.

West,” highlights the competition between the SVRR and the CP, He describes his subject as “an independent, scrappy, chip-on-the-shoulder outfit whose management deserved a better fate.” Despite this provocative stance, he offers an incomplete account of that undeserved fate. Frame acknowledges the Freeport branch and suggests more serious trouble as the Folsom network sought to reach Placerville “despite injunctions, arrests and harassment by Placer County.” He provides no details about such obstacles, but merely declares that once the CP had established service to the Comstock, “the Sacramento Valley Railroad was through. But its part in history will never be forgotten.” Frame neglects to describe how SVRR fits into history, but his focus on the fierce competition between railroads lends little support to the first link narrative.²³

Then, in 1964, William Gwinn produced a History 101 paper titled *The History of the Freeport Railroad, 1863-1865*. This undergraduate work was, intriguingly, preserved by the California State Library. It seems to be the sole academic work ever devoted to the Freeport Railroad, the construction of which triggered the final fight between two rival investor networks with dramatically different visions for the Sacramento region. Gwinn opens by describing Sacramento in the 1860s as, “the terminus of the oldest and most important railroad in the west.” He depicts dramatic changes, generally conducive to development but threatening to the Sacramento establishment. In Gwinn’s analysis, “To avoid continued conflict with the City of Sacramento, major stockholders of the S.V.R.R. decided to build a branch line.”²⁴ His research reveals that the company’s bad relationship with the city triggered at least one 1864 outbreak of mob violence, provoked when the city buried the rails in order to raise the levee.²⁵

²³ Walter Frame, “First in the West,” *Golden Notes* 9, no. 3 (January 1963): 16.

²⁴ William H. Gwinn, *The History of the Freeport Railroad, 1863-1865* (History 101 paper, Sacramento State College, 1964), 1-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

Gwinn challenges “popular opinion” that the Freeport railroad was simply the SVRR’s opportunistic move to avoid paying city fees. Instead, he concludes that the city was making SVRR operations impossible. His writing ends with the following sentence: “The whole history of the Freeport Road was that of a struggle for survival on the part of the S.V.R.R. against the Central Pacific and the City of Sacramento, a struggle which the S.V.R.R. lost in the end and brought a finish to the Freeport Railroad.”²⁶

Gwinn offered a reprise of his provocative paper in a 1971 *Golden Notes* contribution. This submission echoed the earlier appearances of Sac State research in Sacramento’s local history journal. But the results differed dramatically. While Briggs and Roberts retreated from their prior research, Gwinn reproduced his original argument. Although his revised work does not significantly add to our knowledge about the SVRR, its appearance is nonetheless remarkable. Briggs and Roberts had been muted, but this time *Golden Notes* was willing to provide a much louder megaphone for Gwinn.

We can only speculate about the editorial decisions of *Golden Notes* published half a century ago. However, it is worth reflecting on the social changes that took place between 1956 and 1971. The 1950s were a conformist time. On the other hand, the Sacramento Valley Railroad was not some sort of subversive organization – this was no radical uprising like that mounted by the Sacramento Settlers’ Association a few years earlier. This story was about a capitalist fight over profits. Even so, Sacramento’s history establishment facilitated two budding historians’ turning away from their challenging contributions to local history.

In contrast, Gwinn’s research emerged in the late 1960s, which was a renowned period of challenge to authority of all sorts. Gwinn’s research struck a nerve, both generally by questioning

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

authority and more specifically by casting a harsh light on greedy businessmen manipulating government in ways that made life harder for regular people. Whatever their flaws, the SVRR was providing a valuable service of faster and easier shipping. The Big Four were commonly idolized as Sacramentans who connected their town to the world, but Gwinn shows us another side of the story as – he alleges – they exploited political connections to sever a key artery of Sacramento’s lifeblood.

Although this conflict between the city of Sacramento and the S.V.R.R. may have been triggered by legitimate civic needs, it is impossible to forget that the United States Congress had just designated the Central Pacific Railroad to build the California portion of the transcontinental line; that the president of the company had just been elected governor of California and that other officers were among the most prominent citizens of Sacramento.²⁷

We might expect historians of the 1970s to be much more receptive to this sort of challenge than those of 15 years earlier. Even so, Gwinn’s improved exposure apparently did not trigger further exploration of his findings. Although the CP’s political maneuvers are now well known, the local impact is still mostly forgotten. Gwinn’s research reached a dead end. It appears that more than half a century has now passed without another academic paper on the SVRR.

The Historiographic Impact

It would be 25 years before anyone returned to Sacramento’s first railroad. In 1996 Cindy Baker authored a commercial booklet bearing a title that echoed the SP account of forty years prior. Then, Bain’s 1999 *Empire Express* was published in 1999, burying the SVRR in a massive history of the CP. In 2010, Doug Noble wrote the only focused SVRR research of the present century – an article for a Placerville newspaper. And finally Kenneth Owens and Richard Orsi each wrote a book chapter on the environmental impact of railroads in Sacramento, concluding this historiography a decade ago. Each of these works told a very different story. They

²⁷ William H. Gwinn, “The Freeport Railroad,” *Golden Notes* 17, no. 1 (April 1971): 3.

collectively reveal the SVRR to be an enigma, with authors contradicting each other and sometimes even themselves.

Baker's *First in the West* was published by her employer, a cultural resources management firm. Baker concludes that, "The SVRR led directly to the building of the transcontinental railroad," and describes ongoing use of California's first rail corridor. But something is missing. The closing section, titled "Legacy of the Sacramento Valley Railroad" reveals the total loss of facilities that were the city of Folsom's original reason for being. Although the depot *site* is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the depot and shops are long gone. The physical heart of the SVRR, "the first turntable in western America... was excavated by archaeologists in 1995." This essential piece of American infrastructure was buried – literally and historically. But Baker smooths over the abrupt transition from a venerable railbed still in use by mass transit to a town where only "museums and landmarks give evidence of Folsom's rich railroad history."²⁸ Baker does tie Folsom's decline to that of its founding enterprise. And she acknowledges that "the CP became powerful enough to overcome and buy the SVRR, along with all the railroads branching from it."²⁹ But this gives the impression of a simple business acquisition, and fails to capture that the Big Four didn't want to possess their rival's assets - they wanted to bury those assets. Baker's writing certainly raised the profile of a poorly understood piece of Folsom history. It also failed to spark much discussion.

Empire Express is a massive and highly detailed book about Theodore Judah and his transcontinental obsession. Bain presents Judah as completely fixated on the construction of the Pacific Railway. In Bain's reading, Judah was happy to work on the SVRR when it appeared to

²⁸ Cindy L. Baker, *First in the West: The Sacramento Valley Railroad* (Sacramento: PAR Environmental Services, Inc., 1996), 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

be his best route over the Sierra – both geographical and organizational. But he didn't hesitate to move on to better opportunities. Once it became clear that the SVRR would stop in Folsom, Judah set off on his own. Bain unearths fascinating evidence that Judah's work on the Cal Central positioned him for a scheme of his own – an "Eastern Extension" heading uphill from Lincoln to a paper town that he called Centralia. This suggests that Judah was already working on his own route into the mountains, hoping that a path over the Sierra would reveal itself.

Bizarrely, Bain fails to mention the purchase of the SVRR in more than 700 pages. Instead, he recounts that co-owner Lester Robinson's post-mortem attacks on Judah were motivated by bitterness that the CPRR had *not* purchased his railroad.³⁰ Even when Bain describes a CP acquisition spree, the purchase of Judah's own first work is left off the shopping list.³¹ In contrast, Bain devotes a half page to the 1868 capture of the California Central from SVRR founder, Col. Charles Lincoln Wilson.³² So why not squeeze in a few words about the purchase of Lincoln's first railroad? This was the final nail in the coffin for any serious competition to the Big Four, their final victory over Judah's idealism. It warrants a mention.

A decade later, Doug Noble gave the Placerville perspective on the SVRR, in the *Mountain Democrat* newspaper. Most of Noble's account covers familiar ground, but he also depicts a bona fide competition to lay tracks over the Sierra. He claims that the CPRR played dirty in the 1864 race to deliver San Francisco newspapers to Virginia City, Nevada. This publicity contest pitted two transportation systems against each other – the competitors employed locomotives as well as horseback riders to fill gaps in their rails. For Noble, this multimodal publicity stunt set the stage for the real struggle to cross the mountains with iron and ties. He

³⁰ David Haward Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 146.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 336.

³² *Ibid.*, 395-6.

acknowledges that the SVRR was unlikely to win the race, but claims that the CP still smelled a threat and “took steps to completely eliminate this problem.”³³ This is apparently the last word, to date, on what happened to the SVRR. Twelve years have passed since Noble made this claim.

Ideally, such an unresolved historiography would conclude with a more recent entry. But we are left to explore a couple of decade-old works, which peripherally engaged with the SVRR. Given the paucity of research in the past few generations, we must make the most of what exists: *River City, Valley Life: An Environmental History of the Sacramento Area* features two chapters that each provide thoughtful analyses in which the SVRR played a small role. These chapters reveal how faintly historians recall Sacramento’s first railroad.

Owens’ chapter was titled “River City: Sacramento’s Gold Rush Birth and Transformation.” He includes a short section explaining how Sacramento consolidated its control over traffic between San Francisco and the Gold Country. He then describes how the favored wagon route over the mountain took shape along the southern fringe of the American River watershed. But he claims that the SVRR actually *improved* Sacramento’s position as a hub. He admits, though, that it also “shifted the bulk of the long-distance wagon freighting business” out of town. But then, a paragraph later, he claims that “the SVRR gave Sacramento merchants a tighter hold on the commercial life of the gold country.” Which was it? Did the SVRR strengthen or weaken Sacramento City?³⁴

“Railroads and the Urban Environment: Sacramento’s Story” is Richard J. Orsi’s contribution to the book. It begins strangely: “Sacramento’s railroad era dawned on January 8, 1863.” And yet, on the very next page (and seven years earlier) he acknowledges that the SVRR

³³ Doug Noble, “The Sacramento Valley Railroad: The first railroad of the West.” *Mountain Democrat* (Placerville, Calif.), November 2, 2010.

³⁴ Owens, Kenneth N. “River City: Sacramento’s Gold Rush Birth and Transfiguration.” In *River City and Valley Life: An Environmental History of the Sacramento Region*, ed. Christopher J. Castaneda and Lee M. A. Simpson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 46-7.

had provided “glimpses of the economic benefits that could come from railroad service.”³⁵

Unfortunately for Sacramento, the SVRR was owned by callous investors from San Francisco, and built a levee that worsened flooding. When asked to mitigate their harmful impact, the company declined and became “a civic pariah.” The city retaliated by blocking the SVRR’s access to the city waterfront then physically severing the tracks. And yet Orsi blames the railroad for its decision “to abandon the city, and... move its terminus downriver a few miles to Freeport” – supposedly because it didn’t want to pay taxes for levee improvements.³⁶

Historians seem to be confused about the Sacramento Valley Railroad. Competent researchers trip over even simple matters of fact. Both Owens and Orsi made uncharacteristically garbled statements about the same small topic within their respective works. Both contradicted themselves about the reason they were talking about the SVRR in the first place. Owens claimed that shippers left Sacramento, which became a stronger shipping center. Orsi showed that the SVRR had been pushed out of town but blamed it for leaving.

Conclusion

The Sacramento Valley Railroad needs serious historical attention. In more than 150 years, only one findable academic work has been written specifically *about* the SVRR. That author decried a “shameful local neglect.” And nearly 70 years later that shameful neglect continues. Generations of railroad aficionados have spilled oceans of ink about everything on rails. And yet they have largely ignored the first railroad to be built west of the Mississippi, which transformed Sacramento and sparked years of occasionally violent conflict. While

³⁵ Richard J. Orsi, “Railroads and the Urban Environment: Sacramento’s Story,” in *River City and Valley Life: An Environmental History of the Sacramento Region*, ed. Christopher J. Castaneda and Lee M. A. Simpson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 77-8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-3.

countless books and articles have studied the transcontinental railroad, nobody has ever written a monograph about the predecessor road that made that project possible. This is really weird.

The SVRR is not an entirely forgotten topic, however. This historiography reveals how, on several occasions, researchers have tackled this story. And each time Sacramento has looked the other way. Serious investigation has been repeatedly met with silence and obfuscation.

Most immediately we need to understand what actually happened to the SVRR - especially with regards to Judah's departure and the CP takeover. As the historic facts are clarified, the historiography will need to be expanded. The present essay is only a start of figuring out why the SVRR is so poorly understood. Additional sources have surely escaped this author's notice.

The SVRR story overflows with interesting issues and research questions. It strikes many chords familiar to Western historians. By all rights, people should love this story. But the Central Pacific had its own story to tell, and has dominated the discourse. Some of this historic bounty has been critical, of course. But that is not the point. This was not a black-and-white matter. The SVRR was a flawed and controversial enterprise, which seems to have generally disregarded the welfare of people living in Sacramento. Yet the organizers of the SVRR also seem to have been genuinely and consistently interested in improving the infrastructure for access to the Mother Lode as a whole. We should learn from the Sacramento Valley Railroad's flaws and mistakes, as well as the brave struggle it mounted against the emerging Octopus.

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