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The Railroad in the Salton Sink

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During the latter half of the nineteenth century, government reconnaissance parties explored every natural gateway in the mountains surrounding coastal Southern California. Of all these natural gateways, San Gorgonio Pass, by reason of its broad approaches and open country, was the least costly of the three to build through - in terms of capital expenditure.

The Southern Pacific Railroad Company of California, chartered during April 1866, was originally projected to construct a line south from San Francisco via Los Angeles to to the Colorado River, where it was to connect with a railroad from the East. It was on February 13, 1875, that contracts were let for the extension of Southern Pacific's Los Angeles Division from Spadra southeast to San Gorgonio Pass. Throughout the early summer of 1875, a large force of men was engaged in grading the railroad through San Timoteo Canyon and over San Gorgonio Pass. On August 21st, the Gazette noted that work had been temporarily suspended in the face of temperatures registering 120 degrees in the shade - if any could be found. Reports circulated that a number of Chinese, employed in grading in the Cabezon Valley, had perished from the intense heat. On January 28, 1876, regular train service was extended to Whitewater. On May 29, 1876, the 70-mile section from Colton to Indian Wells was completed and opened for traffic in late July. Here the construction work came to a halt until early 1877, partly because of summer heat and also, due to the uncertainty of Federal aid to the Texas & Pacific Railroad. During the fall of 1876, large quantities of ties and rails accumulated at Indian Wells, and consequently, once it was decided to continue the railroad east, it was done rapidly. In the meantime, Indian Wells had been renamed Indio at the request of the federal government. Durmid was reached on March 8, 1877, Pilot Knob on April 29th, and on May 23, 1877, the tracks were laid to the west bank of the Colorado River at Yuma. The rapid construction through this section was as much the result of the topography encountered, as it was the skill and tenacity of the railroad builders. From a summit of 2,592 feet at San Gorgonio, the rails made a steady descent into the Colorado Desert. At a point just west of Indio, the grade slipped below sea level and for 61 miles it traversed a vast sub-sea level depression known as the Salton Basin. The lowest point reached by rail in the continental United States, -266.5 feet, was achieved eleven miles east of Walters, and it was not until Flowing Well was reached that the railroad was again above the level of the sea. The line was mostly tangent. Curves were few, and grading light. "From Dos Palmas to a point between Frink's Spring, there is no brush - nothing but complete waste and utter desolation." wrote F.E. Shearer, in 1884, for the Pacific Tourist. He went on to report that "the climate...is not one in which a sane person would select to spend the summer."

The soil below Coachella Valley, all the way to the Mexican border and beyond, was found to be very rich, but water was in short supply. It was noted, however, that the Colorado River, where it entered the delta region below Yuma, was at an elevation of 25 to 200 feet higher than the arid land situated immediately to the west. Ultimately, on May 14, 1901, irrigation water was turned on at the Pilot Knob head gate. Promotion and colonization of the area began immediately. Because the

developers did not want to frighten settlers and investors by using such ominous words as "desert" and "sink," the promoters changed the name of the basin to "The Imperial Valley." Transportation would be a vital element in the success of their endeavors. Consequently, Anthony H. Heber, in association with another local businessman, William F. Holt, organized the Imperial & Gulf Railway Company on March 12, 1902, to build from a connection with the "Yuma Main," about 54 miles east of Indio, south into the valley. Work began at Imperial Junction (formerly the station of Old Beach) on October 16, 1902. Southern Pacific advanced all the necessary funds for its construction and SP crews performed the actual construction work. . Twenty-eight miles of railroad were completed and placed in operation to Imperial by April 10th of the following year. The entire 41 miles from Imperial Junction to Calexico opened on June 29, 1904. Meanwhile, the Southern Pacific organized the Inter-California Railway on June 18, 1904, which continued the work beyond Calexico into the Republic of Mexico and, in turn, was operated under lease by the Southern Pacific. With the assurance of an adequate supply of fresh water and transportation facilities, the Imperial Valley began to blossom. Where, in 1900, there had not been a single civilized inhabitant in the valley, now, in 1904, more than 12,000 persons had settled in the newly created towns of Brawley, Holtville, Heber and Calexico.

The Colorado River, which had enabled the development of the Imperial Valley, was also capable of great fury. During the years from 1905 through 1907, the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad east of Indio were subjected to flooding, washout and inundation by water that came from this great river. Serious problems began in 1904, when the main canal, feeding the Imperial Valley, became so filled with silt that it was unable to carry sufficient water into the valley. In order to relieve the water shortage, a new intake was cut in before arrangements could be made for a controlling gate. As a result of this oversight, in January 1905, another strong flood occurred which widened the intake to more than a half mile. This allowed the whole river to come rushing through the break, spreading the water over an area of eight to ten miles in width. It then collected and flowed down the slope of the basin in two separate streams, forming what is now known as the Salton Sea. Efforts to control the river were futile. Thousands of acres of crop land were inundated and the towns of Calexico and Mexicali were partially destroyed. In many places, the tracks of Southern Pacific subsidiary Inter-California Railway were either submerged or totally washed away. With the summer floods of June 1906, the Salton Sea rose at a rate of seven inches per day, engulfing an area of 400 square miles. The main line of the Southern Pacific, having been built in nearly a direct line across this sink, was severely affected by these extraordinary developments.

Eleven shoo-fly (temporary lines) were required on the Indio-Yuma main line between July 1905 and February 1906 as the Salton Sea gradually rose from two, to two and one-half inches a day, raising the water level to the point where it reached and covered the SP tracks for miles between Salton and Mortmere. Ultimately, 39 miles of new railroad at the (-)200-foot contour was built between a point near Volcano and Mecca. As the frantic work of building temporary lines was underway, an even more desperate undertaking was being made by the California Development Company to close the break in the Colorado River.

During 1906, with Imperial Development Company resources exhausted, Southern Pacific Company joined the fray expending hundreds of thousands of dollars in what was up that point a futile attempt. That December, at the request of Theodore Roosevelt president of the United States, SP president E.H. Harriman, pledged the full force and expertise of the railroad to close the gap as soon as possible. All other operations of the SP, except for relief efforts in connection with the San Francisco earthquake and fire, became subordinate to the Colorado River break. Finally, on February 10, 1907, the break was closed and the river once again headed toward the gulf. The task had been accomplished in a final 52-day push, which taxed the facilities of the Southern Pacific to the utmost. H.T. Cory, who had been brought in by the Southern Pacific to supervise this final work, later recalled: "For three weeks two divisions of the SP, embracing about 200 miles of main line, was (sic) practically tied up because of the demand for equipment and facilities. We had 1,000 flat cars exclusively for our service and shipping from San Pedro was practically abandoned for two weeks until we returned a considerable portion of the equipment. It was a case of putting rock into the break faster than the river could take it away. In 15 days after we got the trestle across and dumped the first carload of rock, we had the river stopped. We hauled it from Patagonia, Arizona, 480 miles away, over two mountain passes; from Tacna, 60 mile to the east, from three or four quarries near Colton, 200 miles to the west and over San Gorgonio Pass. " Over 2 million cubic feet of rock was dumped to close the break in the river. SP eventually estimated its expense in the effort at \$3 million.

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