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(A Committee of the Fullerton Railway Plaza Association)

Fullerton Celebrates its Railway Heritage

By Barry Christensen

Nestled in the northern reaches of California's legendary Orange County, the city of Fullerton is a major railway junction and favorite stop for rail fans. Stirred by the enthusiasm of the newly formed Fullerton Railway Plaza Association, citizens are rediscovering the rich heritage of Southern California railroads that exist in their own backyards.

The city takes its name from George H. Fullerton, president of the Pacific Land and Improvement Company. He helped determine the route of the Santa Fe Railway (AT&SP) which owned the land company. City founders Edward and George Amerige offered free right of way through, and an interest in, their townsite. So George Fullerton, convinced of the potential commercial value of the proposed line, rerouted the railroad survey. The townsite directors voted to name the future city after him in honor of this decision.

Fullerton's first depot was finished for the arrival of Santa Fe Railway trains in August of 1888. It was replaced by the current Santa Fe depot in 1930. It has served Amtrak intercity trains since 1971 and Metrolink commuter trains since 1994. The building is now beautifully restored and has been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Today it is joined by Fullerton's historic Union Pacific (UP) and Pacific Electric (PE) depots. Both were renovated as restaurants at the transportation center. Orange County Transportation Authority buses (and possibly light rail trains if a proposed system is constructed) weave their way in and out of the center throughout the day, providing direct connections to Fullerton's five colleges and universities, Disneyland Resort, Knott's Berry Farm and regional shopping malls.

For almost a century, fruit and vegetable packers provided the railways with most of their freight business in Orange County. Today only one packing house remains in Fullerton, served by truck. Other customers still ship by rail, however, including Con-Agra (Hunt Wesson) and Kimberly Clark.

Located between San Bernardino and Los Angeles on the AT&SF's Chicago mainline, Fullerton has always witnessed a parade of transcontinental freights

moving through town. Just east of the depot is Fullerton Jct., start of the famed Surf Line to San Diego. Santa Fe super power 4-8-4 steam locomotive #3751 was a regular through town in the days of steam, and since its restoration it has often returned to Fullerton.

Local railroad enthusiasts flocked to Fullerton's trackside scene in the 1990's. Burgeoning intermodal traffic from the Los Angeles/Long Beach Harbors and the colorful Santa Fe red and silver Warbonnet "Super Fleet" diesels made train watching more exciting than ever.

With support from the State of California, Amtrak developed the Los Angeles to San Diego "LOSSAN Corridor" into the nation's second busiest Intercity rail route. Service expanded to Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo.

Transcontinental passenger trains began to call at Fullerton again after ATSF's Pasadena line was taken over for commuter rail use. By the time Metrolink's Orange County commuter train service was up and running, rail traffic through Fullerton was so intense that extra main lines were being constructed to accommodate all the movements. As of 1999, approximately 90 trains make their way through Fullerton each week day.

Expectations are for continued increases in rail traffic with the new millennium. Fullertonians are grateful that the city government has foreseen the need for railroad crossing underpasses. Currently the sixth in a series of railroad/street grade separations is being constructed.

The AT&SF moved its freight switcher base to nearby La Mirada, from which the modern Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) dispatches two weekday jobs to switch all of Orange County. The Union Pacific's former Anaheim branch ends today at Basta in west Fullerton and is served by a weekday local. Before UP's merger with Southern Pacific, an SP local also served the line via trackage rights obtained when SP's Pacific Electric abandoned their Fullerton branch.

The Fullerton Railway Plaza Association (FRPA), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, is dedicated to preserving southern California railroad history through the creation of a large interactive railroad attraction at the Fullerton Transportation Center. The attraction would combine a Santa Fe Railway heritage museum and restoration facility, model railroad group, meeting facilities, classrooms for education programs, retail establishments and restaurants on 100,000square feet of land.

The architecture and landscaping will mix well with the center's three renovated train depots and the adjacent restored historic downtown district. A synergy of efforts from a private developer, various levels of government, and non-profit groups is envisioned in this project over a period of five to ten years.

Railroad safety is a primary concern in the city as the speed, frequency and quietness of trains increases. A need was identified to reach the area's children

with the Operation Lifesaver program offered by the railroads. The FRPA asked the city of Fullerton to co-sponsor a community awareness event with them at the Transportation Center.

The result was the first annual Fullerton Railroad Days, held on the weekend of May 1st and 2nd, 1999. The theme was "Railroads in Our Daily Lives," combining the rail safety program with historical displays, model railroads, and rail travel promotion. A successful rail safety poster contest in Fullerton's elementary schools helped spread the word. The event was a resounding success, with upwards of 15,000 people in attendance.

BNSF gave tours of one of their newest diesel electric locomotives in the famed red and silver Warbonnet paint scheme. Amtrak showed off one of their new passenger locomotives, as well as a Coast Starlight hi-level Pacific Parlour Car and a Superliner sleeper. By comparison, a half century's difference in rail travel was provided by vintage rail passenger car operators. Restored 1949 SP barber shop lounge Overland Trail and a silver fluted stainless steel Burlington Route sleeper were open for public inspection.

Metrolink sponsored the popular Operation Life Saver activity for the kids while the FRPA introduced their family-oriented rail attraction concept to a fascinated public. Numerous modular model railroad clubs set up their layouts in facilities sponsored by Toyota and Home Depot. A variety of rail groups, historical societies, youth organizations, and community service groups rounded out the Railroad Days scene, complemented by military color guards, entertainment and lots of food.

As a result of the tremendous success of this inaugural event, support for development of the Fullerton Railway Plaza proposal is building. In addition, the next Fullerton Railroad Days has been set for May 2000. To find out more about what is being planned, log on to Fullerton's own internationally famous Trainweb internet site at www.trainweb.com/frpa, or write to FRPA, PO Box 3987, Fullerton, CA 92834. We'll see you trackside next time you visit Orange County.