

**Sean Mitchell**

**The Demise of The Northwestern Pacific Railroad**

**Charles R. Barnum History Award Entry**

## The Demise of The Northwestern Pacific Railroad

Sean Mitchell

Sitting on the outskirts of Old Town Eureka, between Waterfront Drive, and 2<sup>nd</sup> street, the sad remains of five diesel locomotives are slowly rusting away. They are covered in moss, graffiti and suffering from broken glass and boarded windows. The grass below them is growing high and the railroad tracks heading north to Arcata and south toward the bay area are paved over at road crossings. The railroad depot with the “Eureka” herald is boarded up and also covered in graffiti. Weeds and grass litter the parking lot, and the whole area is surrounded by chain link fence. It is a scene of desolation. The broken down depot, the sad looking locomotives, are all the indications of a failed infrastructure. These five engines weigh 240,000 pounds each, and are worth nearly \$250,000 each in operating condition. Why would these expensive steel machines be left to rot? This was not a choice by the owners, nor was it a story without a struggle. What events led to the closure of this railroad?

These tracks are the remains of the once great and vastly important Northwestern Pacific Railroad, known as the “Redwood Empire Route.” The northern end of this railroad has not operated since 1998 and has since fallen into disrepair, particularly the 100 mile maintenance headache that is the Eel River corridor. Suffering from monetary issues, multiple private owners and finally an emergence into public ownership, the Northwestern Pacific has seen many phases. The NWP was nothing short of an empire. The company owned a fleet of ferry ships, it had an “interurban” street car network, including steam, electric and diesel powered trains.<sup>1</sup> The Redwood Empire route served many passenger stations and handled a vast array of different freight enterprises. The NWP was a branch line subsidiary of the Southern Pacific railroad, once running from Tiburon, California, 300 miles north to Eureka. During the golden age of passenger rail travel, it was possible to take a ferry from San Francisco, ride the rails from Tiburon in the north bay, all the way to Blue Lake, or even Trinidad in

<sup>1</sup> The southern end pioneered electric street cars, using a 600 volt 3<sup>rd</sup> rail, however the railroad also used the more common diesel powered locomotives.

Humboldt County. The rail line was built after the consolidation of over 42 short line logging railroads and construction was completed in 1914. But this massive feat of railroad ingenuity was not immune to nature. Unstable roadbed which melts below the rails, and the often torrential Eel River, threatened the line. There came a major turning point in December of 1964. One hundred miles of track, multiple train stations, numerous bridges and human lives were lost in the "Christmas Flood" of the Eel River. Warm winter rains melted snow pack, and the river raged, destroying entire communities and forever changing the landscape of the Eel river. The reconstruction of the line was rushed, taking only 177 days.<sup>2</sup> The Southern Pacific feared losing not only business in the north end, but also all major highways were washed out and gone. Rail service was an important solution to the lack of trucks shipping supplies and goods to flood ravaged communities. The SP did everything in their power to rebuild the infrastructure quickly. Despite the importance, this was a major event that began a downward spiral for the railroad. This failure was not an overnight affair, rather a series of events which all led to the closure in 1998.

In February 1998, a severe weather pattern called El Niño, caused flooding and track washouts from Shellville to Novato, in the southern most section of track on the NWP. This track was the only rail outlet from the north end so all freight was trapped. Because the railroad had no revenue coming in, the historically expensive, and troublesome Eel River canyon was left to sit and there was no money available for maintenance. By April 1998, the canyon was inoperable. The tracks were covered with landslides. The roadbed had disappeared, rail was kinked, dipped and uneven, looking much more like a theme park roller coaster, than a freight railroad.<sup>3</sup> Without enough money to finish the repair of the Eel River segment, all hope of rail service to the northwest corner of the state was buried. In the words of Dan Hauser, (Executive Director of the North Coast Railroad Authority at the time) it is now

<sup>2</sup> Stindt, Fred A. *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. Vol. 2, 1964-1985. Kelseyville, CA: Fred A. Stindt, 1985

<sup>3</sup> For matters of comprehension, it should be noted that the roadbed refers to the rock, also known as ballast which keeps the wooden ties in place. The actual rail, which the wheels roll on, is held down with spikes, which are driven into the ties.

“Practically irretrievable.”<sup>4</sup> The NWP suffered due to the wild environment, unstable geology, and an ever encroaching river basin. The reconstruction of the line after the 1964 flood could have improved this issue by implementing preventative landslide mitigation and washout protection. Rebuilding this massive stretch of track would have been the perfect time to overhaul the Eel River Canyon, with foresight to the future. However, the reconstruction was highly accelerated and engineering methods were not designed for long term sustainability. The 1964 flood was the beginning of the end for viability of the Eel River segment. It turned a once profitable railroad, into a political conundrum, causing maintenance headaches, ownership issues and eventually a mandatory closure.

There is a wealth of information about the Northwestern Pacific Railroad available. However, much of this focuses on the general history of the railroad, the street car passenger service, mainline south to north passenger service and then to freight service. This also includes the switch from steam to diesel motive power and also the change of the NWP ownership. These have been common areas of study among all rail historians and areas which are not necessarily unique to the NWP. The important part of this story is the switch from Southern Pacific, to Eureka Southern, to the current North Coast Railroad Authority ownership.<sup>5</sup> Historians interested in this railroad have focused mostly on the key events such as the consolidation of the railroads in Humboldt County, the 1964 flood, and the numerous washouts which ended rail service.<sup>6</sup> Financial issues have been a very important topic as well. These

4 Interview with Dan Hauser (Former Arcata mayor 1978-82, Executive Director North Coast Railroad Authority, 1996-98), at home interview, February 28, 2013, Arcata CA.

5 For more information about the building, and rise/fall of the NWP, see Fred A. Stindt and Guy L. Dunscomb, *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad*, Vol. 1, Redwood City, CA: Fred A. Stindt, 1964; Fred A. Stindt, *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad*, Vol. 2, 1964-1985, Kelseyville, CA: Fred A. Stindt, 1985; *Willits to Eureka*, Sausalito CA: DF & Associates, 1989, VHS; *Today's Northwestern Pacific Railroad*, Pasadena CA: (Pentrex, 1993), VHS; Wesly Fox, *Northwestern Pacific Railroad and its Successors*; Arvada, Co: (Fox Publications, 1995); *California's North Coast Logging Railroads*, Oakland, Calif.: (Catenary Video Productions, 1996), VHS; Fred Codoni, Paul Trimble, *Northwestern Pacific Railroad*, Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2006; *Rails to the Redwood Empire*, Harriman, NY: (Catenary Video Productions, 2006)

6 For information regarding the Northwestern Pacific and it's struggles as *The North Coast Railroad*, see Jim Doyle, “Workin' on the Railroad / The Northwestern Pacific rolls through glorious, rugged country -- but the line is one of the toughest in the nation to keep running. If it fails, a vital link between the North Bay and the North Coast will be lost,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 7, 1997, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Workin-on-the-Railroad-The-Northwestern-2828637.php#page-2>; Sean Zwagerman, “Northwestern Pacific's Undying Spirit,” *Rail News*, December 1997, 50 <http://www.trainlife.com/magazines/pages/246/18340/december-1997-page-50>

include efforts to rebuild the line, and a somewhat shallow historiography about the money issues of the 1990's.<sup>7</sup> But how is it that this 100 year empire came to screeching halt in 1998? Historians have failed to tie all of the events together. Because of outdated information and the failure to investigate the repercussions of the 1964 flood, and most importantly, the underfunded, and financially desolate North Coast Railroad Authority, historians have somewhat missed the true causes of the failure of the NWP. The shift from Southern Pacific, to Eureka Southern, to North Coast Railroad left the line damaged, neglected, and bleeding money. Fifteen years after the line shut down, I will look at the individual causes which doomed the whole line, from flood damage, to an unstable lineage of management. Most importantly I will examine the issues regarding the maintenance of the Eel River segment, which spurred from the rushed reconstruction after the devastating 1964 flood.

In order to understand the failure of the Northwestern Pacific, we must understand why this is not a typical railroad. The NWP north of Willits runs through the Eel River Canyon, an area which is subject to some of the most rugged geology and there fore constant seismic activity in the world. A journalist from the area followed the line though the canyon in 2006, on a home made rail bike, to survey the railroad property.

The train track carves through one of the planet's most unstable geology, called the Mendocino Triple Junction, where the Gorda, Pacific, and North American plates — three slabs of the planet's crust — collide, rub, and weld together. The process behind the formation of the northern Coastal Range is complicated and not yet fully understood by geologists, who long considered the region a mystery.”<sup>8</sup>

This journalist encountered massive, incomprehensible washouts, areas where track simply ceased to

7 For information about the fate of the railroad in the last 15 years after it's closure, see “North Coast Railroad Authority Newsletters, 1989-2004,” accessed 14 October, 2012, <http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/MCRS/Excerpts%20from%20MCRS%20newsletters.htm>; Tim Freeman, “Up the Eel River Canyon,” *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, 30 June, 2004. <http://www.theava.com/04/0630-eelrails.html>; “Draft Environmental Impact Report,” North Coast Railroad Authority, 5 November, 2009, [http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR\\_11\\_09/01\\_Report/03\\_Project\\_Description\\_11.05.09.pdf](http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR_11_09/01_Report/03_Project_Description_11.05.09.pdf); “The Redwood Empire Route,” *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad in California*, November 2010, <http://www.redwoodrailroads.com/>

8 Tim Freeman, “Up the Eel River Canyon,” *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, 30 June, 2004. <http://www.theava.com/04/0630-eelrails.html>

exist. These washouts occur because of the location of the tracks. Not only is the soil unstable, but the right of way, (ROW) is directly inside the Eel River Canyon, and directly next to the Eel River. The rails have always been completely at the mercy of the weather, the river and the soil. Heavy rains would force rock, mud and soil down the canyon walls, sweeping away the footing of the rails. The roadbed could be compared to hypothetical tracks built on the steep slope of a beach where erosion is simply unavoidable. In the film *Willits to Eureka*, a derailment is documented. The heavy rail cars would cause this roadbed to squirm and slide under the weight of the load (some cars weighing up to 100 tons).<sup>9</sup> This movement of ties and rail would cause the massive wheels to jump the track and land on the ground, causing the train to slam to a halt. These derailments were constant headaches and they would send rail workers into overtime pay, which would often leave the train and its workers stranded in the canyon. Derailments, land slides and washouts would slow down the train movement, and because of this, the train crews would often exceed 12 hours of work, without getting home to Willits or Eureka. NWP personnel would have to drive from either Eureka or Willits to rescue the overworked train crews. The train would be abandoned until a new crew could be transferred to resume work.<sup>10</sup> To cope with the varied terrain, the line follows the relatively flat grade of the river canyon. If built outside this natural cut in the earth, the railroad would have had much steeper grades, with endless tunnels and bridges. The line was built in 1914, and technology was limited, so it is clear that building through the river canyon was the easiest to survey, construct, and operate.<sup>11</sup> Once maintenance fell behind, easy operations were no longer the norm. The active geology of the area is simply no place for a railroad, and certainly not a neglected one. Winters are brutal and wet and summers are scorching and dry. This contrast in weather conditions was tough for the railroad, making it one of the hardest to maintain in America. "During the dry months, the sun heats up some sections of rail like boiled spaghetti -- causing

<sup>9</sup> *Willits to Eureka*. Sausalito CA: DF & Associates, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *Today's Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. Pasadena CA: Pentrex, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> "The Redwood Empire Route," *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad in California*, November 2010, <http://www.redwoodrailroads.com/>

kinks that can derail a moving train..."<sup>12</sup> These kinks are the product of metal expansion. As the rails heat up, they get longer, stressing the spikes and tie plates which hold the rails in place. The fluctuation of hot summers and cold winters would cause the rails to shift, bend, and stray out of gauge, making derailments a non stop issue.<sup>13</sup> The wooden ties which support the rails would stay wet for months, but would then bake in the summer, accelerating rot, and failure. The summers were awful, but the winters were the toughest for the railroad, forcing it to close for months to do repairs. The rains were typically relentless, and they made keeping up on rail conditions next to impossible.

'The trainman is a different breed,' says Frank Lovio, the railroad's project manager. 'People think it's easy, but there's a lot of stress. . . . You ask yourself, Am I going to stay on? What will I see around the corner? In January, there wasn't one mile of our track where we didn't have something happen,' he recalls. 'There was either a washout, a sinkhole or a massive slide. One mudslide in the Eel River Canyon grabbed a section of track half the length of a football field, raised it 35 feet and tossed it 75 feet from the roadbed. The soil is that blue goo you can't do anything with,' Lovio says. 'The mountains melt, and the roadbed disappears.'<sup>14</sup>

Frank Lovio, (who now works for the 2011 rendition of the NWP, and railroading to this day) describes the dire state of the canyon. In the natural form of railroading, the heavy weight of rail cars can stress the ties and wear the rails. Given the added issue of an unstable roadbed, the ties and rails wouldn't stay in place. The money behind maintenance issues are ultimately what doomed the railroad. But how did the tracks get so neglected? Operating railroads, much like automobile roads, need to be maintained constantly, or they fall into disrepair. Preventative maintenance is always more cost effective than major emergency repairs. The NWP simply didn't have the money to do the upkeep of the line. The origin of this issue lies within the management of the parent railroad, Southern Pacific.

The unstable status of the railroad ownership is what ultimately spurred the rapid decline.

Hoping to create a link to San Francisco from the logging railroads of Humboldt County, both the

<sup>12</sup> Doyle, Jim, "Workin' on the Railroad / The Northwestern Pacific rolls through glorious, rugged country -- but the line is one of the toughest in the nation to keep running. If it fails, a vital link between the North Bay and the North Coast will be lost," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 7, 1997

<http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Workin-on-the-Railroad-The-Northwestern-2828637.php#page-2>

<sup>13</sup> Gauge refers to the distance between the rails, 4 feet 8.5 inches is standard, any fluctuations can cause a derailment.

<sup>14</sup> Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 2

Southern Pacific railroad and the Santa Fe had interests in building the line. Realizing that only one rail line would be profitable in the Eel River canyon, the NWP was a joint effort of the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railroads, formed in 1907. At this point, the Santa Fe owned the trackage from Eureka to Shively, near the current day Avenue of the Giants. Southern Pacific owned the southern end north to Willits, so it was clear that the route through the canyon would be shortest, and would work best to connect the two lines.<sup>15</sup> The construction was completed in 1914. The line was extremely profitable, and helped spur the growth of the north coast. In 1929, Southern Pacific (SP) bought up all of Santa Fe's interests, and wholly owned the line.<sup>16</sup> The railroad became a major artery for the north coast, and it had a massive impact on the economy of Humboldt, Mendocino, and Sonoma Counties. The Northwestern Pacific was initially a well loved empire, but there was a major turning point which set the operation up for failure. The great flood of 1964 was the beginning of the end for the Redwood Empire Route. In 1964, the Eel River flood completely changed the landscape of the area. Entire communities were destroyed, towns demolished, and the railroad decimated.

Lovio was 14 years old in 1964 when a major flood hit the Eel River. The Lovio family lived in railroad quarters on top of a trestle at South Fork. Both the trestle and their house were swept away by the river. The flood also wiped out 100 miles of track, washed away highway and railroad bridges and left Humboldt County isolated. It took six months to reopen the rail line -- a massive effort made possible only by Southern Pacific's vast resources.<sup>17</sup>

Nineteen people had died, thousands of cattle were lost and nearly all the bridges in the Eel River Canyon had been destroyed. Rail cars littered the landscape, and tunnels were filled with trees and debris from the river. The rebuilding effort was rushed, taking only 177 days to rebuild 100 miles of track, including bridges and tunnels. Contractors and builders from all over the west coast were called in to help rebuild the line.<sup>18</sup> It is arguable that the 1964-65 rebuilding efforts would have been a

<sup>15</sup> Fred Codoni and Paul Trimble, *Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2006), 47

<sup>16</sup> "The Redwood Empire Route," *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad in California*, November 2010, <http://www.redwoodrailroads.com/>

<sup>17</sup> Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 3

<sup>18</sup> Stindt, Fred A. *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. Vol. 2, 1964-1985. Kelseyville, CA: Fred A. Stindt, 1985



fantastic time to retrofit more modern and reliable landslide mitigation efforts. Instead of upgrading the line, the Southern Pacific rushed the rebuilding to get freight moving again.

Here lies our major problem. The SP knew that the terrain was very unstable, and hard to maintain. They sped through the rebuilding process, which didn't prevent future landslides and roadbed issues. Furthermore, while this line was destroyed and inoperable, many customers were lost, because they needed transportation for goods, and shifted to trucking. The Southern Pacific knew the line was too costly to operate, and the profit margin was slim.<sup>19</sup> Because the repairs made were never with the long term sustainability in mind, later repairs were too often and costly. This is why, in 1983, the SP filed for abandonment. When this was denied by the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Southern Pacific kept the line open, only because they were required to.<sup>20</sup> The SP neglected the track, and the total infrastructure.

In 1983 Southern Pacific attempted to abandon the northern portion of the railroad, saying it was costing the company much more to repair and maintain the line than they could make. During administrative proceedings on the abandonment before the Interstate Commerce Commission, the president of Southern Pacific stated it was costing an average of a million dollars each month to maintain the line between Willits and Eureka, and that the company's losses totaled approximately \$70 million. The Interstate Commerce Commission denied Southern Pacific's application for abandonment.<sup>21</sup>

The SP reluctantly continuing north end operations, the SP used the northern end of the line, until a new company offered to buy the troublesome segment.

Eureka businessman Brian Whipple (enthusiastic railroad fanatic/romantic) hoped to revitalize the north end of the line, purchasing the section from Eureka to Willits.<sup>22</sup> It was operated under the name of *Eureka Southern* (reporting marks EUKA, and we will refer to it as ES). Freight operations

<sup>19</sup> Fox, Wesly, *Northwestern Pacific Railroad and its Successors*. Arvada, Co: Fox Publications, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> "The Redwood Empire Route," *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad in California*, November 2010, <http://www.redwoodrailroads.com/>

<sup>21</sup> "The Redwood Empire Route," *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad in California*, November 2010, <http://www.redwoodrailroads.com/>

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Dan Hauser, February 28, 2013

would run between Eureka and Willits, where it was interchanged with the south end, still owned by SP. However, this agreement was not exactly fair to this small start up railroad. ES owned the line from Eureka, southern, (hence the name) to a location called Outlet Creek. Outlet Creek, is a creek just north of Willits, and it is conveniently the southern- most boundary of the maintenance headaches. Dan Hauser explained to me that the small start-up railroad had zero customers from Scotia, all the way to Willits (at Outlet Creek), yet they were still charged with maintaining the most costly, and strenuous portion of the line between these two points. The massive Southern Pacific had control of the Willits rail yard and they were able to essentially get the freight from the north end, without having to maintain the Eel River canyon themselves.<sup>23</sup> Plagued with the same operational money issues, and numerous track headaches, Brian Whipple's Eureka Southern went bankrupt after only 18 months.<sup>24</sup>

In 1991, concerned that a vital link to the north coast would dissolve due to money and management issues, state legislature created the North Coast Railroad Authority (hereafter referred to as the NCRA), with the goals of purchasing the line with public funds. "It's an ill-equipped, financially burdened railroad,' says Dan Hauser, the NCRA's executive director. 'We don't have a tax revenue or any other sources of revenue except our freight revenue, so it's put us in a horrible cash-flow crunch."<sup>25</sup> This interview with Hauser took place while he was the North Coast Railroad director in mid 1997, during the final stretch of the railroad's operations. Because the railroad was not receiving government support for operational costs, all money for maintaining the 315 miles of track, 32 tunnels, hundreds of bridges and numerous culverts,<sup>26</sup> had to come from freight operations. The freight service was supplemented by excursion (passenger) trains.<sup>27</sup> Despite the money issues, when tracks were operational, the North Coast railroad was able to serve as a vital rail link to the north coast.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Dan Hauser, February 28, 2013

<sup>24</sup> Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 3

<sup>25</sup> Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 3

<sup>26</sup> A culvert is typically a passageway below the rail bed for water, often consisting of just a tube, or large pipe. When the water flow surpasses the capability of the pipe size, water will flow over the track/roadbed, causing a washout.

<sup>27</sup> Zwagerman, "Northwestern Pacific's Undying Spirit," 50

It runs tired-out locomotives on badly worn track. It is \$5.5 million in debt and losing thousands of dollars a month -- financial problems that could further delay efforts to run commuter trains in the North Bay. Yet its black-and-red locomotives continue to snake through spectacular wilderness -- hauling loads of timber, plywood and wood pulp from sawmills in Blue Lake and Scotia, fresh milk from dairies and creameries near Fortuna, frozen seafood from Eureka fish processors, grain from Petaluma. And its train crews still ogle river otters and golden eagles along the way.<sup>28</sup>

Along side freight operations, beginning in the late 1980's the Eureka Southern began running passenger excursion trains from Willits to Eureka and back. Pulling beautiful ex-Southern Pacific Daylight passenger cars, these orange, black and yellow train excursions generated a large sum of money for the struggling railroad. This helped ease the financial burden of maintenance and repairs. These rides continued through the 1990's, until the numerous bad winter storms in 96, and 97 forced them to stop. Once tracks became unsafe for passenger use, the FRA, (Federal Rail Administration) stepped in and shut down passenger use for the line.

Since nature has made running the NWP merely formidable, the FRA stepped in to make it nearly impossible. After repeated inspections, the FRA halted summer passenger excursions between Healdsburg and Willits, costing NWP an important source of revenue. On July 25, a celebrity wine train was to run from Asti to Hopland. Instead the passengers sat at Asti and pretended they were moving. The FRA also imposed a 10mph speed limit on most of the 273 mile railroad, making for long workdays for the crew and plenty of overtime pay for the company. This in turn, of course, leaves the railroad with less money to make all the repairs needed to erase speed restrictions.<sup>29</sup>

Without the revenue needed to properly maintain the line, conditions got worse, and worse. This became a cyclical issue. The tracks got worse, causing shut down of passenger service, but because this service was such a money maker, revenue needed to maintain the line simply wasn't available. Freight operations suffered. Customers would often rather ship by truck, because they were worried about losing loads in derailments or having them seriously delayed due to track issues.

The north coast trucking industry simply didn't have the issues of interrupted service like the NWP. (Highways are also funded by taxes and federal/state funding, none of which was going to the

<sup>28</sup> Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 1

<sup>29</sup> Zwagerman, "Northwestern Pacific's Undying Spirit," 53

railroad.)<sup>30</sup> Because the railroad was struggling greatly due to weather and flood damage, outside monetary help was needed. However, in the Eureka Southern days, the company was using disaster relief money for operational costs. This was an accounting headache and it caused the federal government to be weary of allowing the railroad any additional help. When the NCRA took over, they were left with unmaintained track and financial debt.

The railroad is in hot water with the Federal Emergency Management Agency because Hauser's predecessors in the early 1990s used FEMA money for operating expenses instead of emergency repairs -- and so far, FEMA has refused to cover any of the repair costs from last winter's damage. During the spring, the railroad lost as much as \$70,000 a month. The freight business has since picked up, but the rail line is still struggling to turn a profit. The railroad's 98 employees have had to put up with a few late paydays.<sup>31</sup>

With all of these crippling money and maintenance issues, the balance of profit and operational cost was in a nervous state. During the storms of 1994, 95, and 96, the railroad was getting help from FEMA, because the heavy rains causing track issues were considered emergencies. The Federal Emergency Management Agency was helping to prop up the failing railroad. Because of the awful weather and failing track infrastructure in the 1990's, the NWP was in a dire state. "We have a 500-year flood every 10 years,' Lovio says. 'We've had five federal and three state disasters since 1992. The weather up here is the problem. This is like a training center for Railroad 101. If you can survive here, you can survive anywhere.'"<sup>32</sup> It is simply a sad fact of history that the railroad wasn't held up by tax or federal money. The money issues before the string of bad storms was the push that set this railroad company into a very slippery and rapid decline. A public infrastructure like a railroad is a massive operation. It is fair to conclude that if the North Coast Railroad was subsidized, it might have survived. The North Coast Railroad was a public asset, capable of strengthening the economy, and supporting other businesses, however, left to it's own devices, it could not stay afloat. In the summer of

30 Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 3

31 Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 4

32 Doyle, "Workin' on the Railroad," 2

1997, after finally recovering from severe storms and destruction of the winter of 1996, the NWP was on a certain path to failure.

In my personal interview with Dan Hauser, he made it very clear that there has been a disagreement among those interested in the North Coast Railroad, particularly, the events in 1997 to 1998. The common consensus is a vague label that “The Eel River Canyon had bad washouts, and the railroad shut down.” This is the story I had been told two years ago, when I first started researching the history of the line. However, according to Hauser, the true failure was because of the El Niño storms in 1998, near Petaluma, and the national rail network interchange. The fears of railroad workers came true, and the winter of 1997-1998 was one of the wettest in years, causing another round of devastating washouts. However, it was not the canyon the initially failed.

In 1997, summer of 97, we spent every spare dollar, that we could find, maintaining the canyon. Cleaning out culverts, repairing drainage systems mostly. Lifting the sinks, tamping new ballast. In the winter, 1997-98, we had some very big storms. They did not do significant damage to the canyon. The canyon kept running. What happened was, late January of 1998, there was a major El Niño storm event in the bay area that washed out part of (highway) 101, but also, washed out a lot of track, in Southern Sonoma, Marin and Napa counties closing the railroad. Nothing could go out, even though the canyon was still operating. But as long as the railroad was closed down south, it didn't make any difference... We couldn't go anywhere!<sup>33</sup>

Eventually the canyon, due to the lack of revenue and the lack of freight leaving the north coast, failed. Significant repairs were made to rebuild the southern portion so that trains could at least run to serve customers in Willits, but trains were stopped by the Federal Rail Administration. During the last ditch effort of the NCRA's attempt at running trains in 2001, the failure of an important signal crossing in the southern portion of the line, (a major safety hazard) caused for the final closure of the NWP.<sup>34</sup>

“Nowhere in Particular” was the NWP's nickname, never a prediction. Following the reopening, the Federal Railroad Administration shut down the line north of Petaluma and still had not provided

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Dan Hauser, February 28, 2013

<sup>34</sup> “North Coast Railroad Authority Newsletters, 1989-2004,” accessed 14 October, 2012, <http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/MCRS/Excerpts%20from%20MCRS%20newsletters.htm>

inspection of the repairs between Windsor and Willits.”<sup>35</sup> Trains have not rumbled through Eureka, the Eel River Canyon, or Willits, in 15 years. At the mercy of the public and nature, much of the rail is now missing, destroyed, or blocked by brush and pavement. Nearly all the crossings in Arcata and Eureka have been illegally paved over and signal machines broken or missing. Knowing the closure of the line was a possibility in 1997, railroad workers feared it like nothing else, knowing that allowing the line to sit dormant would kill it entirely. “Hauser says he fears shutting down the railroad. ‘My biggest concern,’ he says, ‘is the start up costs would be so much greater than hanging on day to day.’”<sup>36</sup> Dan Hauser was correct and 15 years later, the estimated cost of rebuilding the line is around \$641 million.<sup>37</sup>

The once great empire of the Northwestern Pacific railroad was destroyed in the later years by poor track conditions and lack of funding, all of which spurred from poor management, and the rushed 1964-1965 rebuilding effort of the Southern Pacific. If the line was maintained in the SP years, with greater foresight to the future, using the vast amount of money available during peak lumber flow, it is possible that the line would still be open today. The NWP is a rare case. It was a railroad that once hauled mile long trains and many passengers, now rusting away, and disappearing into the brush and hillsides. Because of traffic congestion in the North Bay Area and the push from the North Coast Railroad Authority, the Northwestern Pacific is now in operation in the south end operating a 62 mile segment rebuilt for grain, gravel, and lumber interests. The entire plans include rebuilding the rail link to Willits, but further rebuilding efforts toward Eureka, are unlikely.<sup>38</sup> Although forgotten for 15 years, the NWP is beginning a new life, fueled by the hopeful shift away from inefficient trucking, and the stress of high gas/freight costs. There has been talk between the NCRA, the cities of Eureka, Arcata,

---

35 Fred Codoni and Paul Trimble, *Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2006), 128

36 Doyle, “Workin’ on the Railroad,” 5

37 “Draft Environmental Impact Report,” North Coast Railroad Authority, 5 November, 2009.

[http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR\\_11\\_09/01\\_Report/03\\_Project\\_Description\\_11.05.09.pdf](http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR_11_09/01_Report/03_Project_Description_11.05.09.pdf)

38 “Draft Environmental Impact Report,” North Coast Railroad Authority, 5 November, 2009.

[http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR\\_11\\_09/01\\_Report/03\\_Project\\_Description\\_11.05.09.pdf](http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR_11_09/01_Report/03_Project_Description_11.05.09.pdf)

and the Timber Heritage Association (a non-profit organization hoping to build a logging and railroad museum in Samoa) to rebuild the northern segment of the line. This would include a walking path and recreational steam powered excursion train around the Eureka bay. Besides tourist trains, it is highly unlikely, that we will ever see the original NWP run to Eureka again. It is important that the vast history of the NWP is not lost, and although the trains cease to run in the north end of the line, rails rust, and ties rot, the memories live on in those who lived this fading era.

## Bibliography

- "About us/ Our Mission." *The Timber Heritage Association*. September, 2012,  
<http://timberheritage.org/about/mission/index.html>
- California's North Coast Logging Railroads. Oakland, Calif.: Catenary Video Productions, 1996.
- Codoni, Fred, Paul Trimble, *Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2006
- DeAngelo, Harry, and Linda DeAngelo. "Ancient Redwoods and the Politics of Finance: The Hostile Takeover of the Pacific Lumber Company." *Journal of Financial Economics* 47. no.1. (1998): 3-53. [http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.humboldt.edu/10.1016/s0304-405X\(97\)00036-6](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.humboldt.edu/10.1016/s0304-405X(97)00036-6)
- Doyle, Jim, "Workin' on the Railroad / The Northwestern Pacific rolls through glorious, rugged country -- but the line is one of the toughest in the nation to keep running. If it fails, a vital link between the North Bay and the North Coast will be lost," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 7, 1997  
<http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Workin-on-the-Railroad-The-Northwestern-2828637.php#page-2>
- "Draft Environmental Impact Report," North Coast Railroad Authority, 5 November, 2009.  
[http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR\\_11\\_09/01\\_Report/03\\_Project\\_Description\\_11.05.09.pdf](http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/Acrobat/DEIR_11_09/01_Report/03_Project_Description_11.05.09.pdf)
- Fox, Wesly, *Northwestern Pacific Railroad and its Successors*. Arvada, Co: Fox Publications, 1995.
- Freeman, Tim, "Up the Eel River Canyon," *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, 30 June, 2004.  
<http://www.theava.com/04/0630-eelrails.html>
- FRA Emergency Order No. 14, Notice No. 4, 62 Fed. Reg. 4568 (Jan 30, 1997)  
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1997-01-30/pdf/97-2298.pdf>
- FRA Emergency Order No. 21, Notice No. 1, 63 Fed. Reg. 67976 (Dec. 9, 1998)  
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1998-12-09/html/98-32649.htm>
- "North Coast Railroad Authority Newsletters, 1989-2004," accessed 14 October, 2012,  
<http://www.northcoastrailroad.org/MCRS/Excerpts%20from%20MCRS%20newsletters.htm>
- "Rails to the Redwood Empire." Harriman, NY: Catenary Video Productions, 2006
- "The Redwood Empire Route," *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad in California*, November 2010,  
<http://www.redwoodrailroads.com/>
- Stindt, Fred A. *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. Vol. 2, 1964-1985. Kelseyville, CA: Fred A. Stindt, 1985



Stindt, Fred A. and Guy L. Dunscomb. *The Northwestern Pacific Railroad*. Vol. 1. Redwood City, CA: Fred A. Stindt, 1964

"Today's Northwestern Pacific Railroad." Pasadena CA: Pentrex, 1993.

"Willits to Eureka." Sausalito CA: DF & Associates, 1989.

Zwagerman, Sean, "Northwestern Pacific's Undying Spirit," *Rail News*, December 1997, 50  
<http://www.trainlife.com/magazines/pages/246/18340/december-1997-page-50>