

GUIDE TO THE RAILTOWN 1897 STATE HISTORIC PARK PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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Finding Guide written and encoded by
Sam Skow

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Park History

Railtown 1897 State Historic Park contains roughly 24 acres of historical resources. Located in Tuolumne County, the park resides in the foothills of the central Sierra Nevada in the census-designated place of Jamestown at 10501 Reservoir Road. The park is accessible by car via Reservoir Road.

Prior to the introduction of the mining and timber industries, the Sierra Foothills in Tuolumne County served as home to the Tuolumne Band of Miwok Indians for thousands of years. Hunter-gatherers, the Miwok people subsisted primarily on fish, acorns, and deer meat, along with wild berries, seeds, and nuts. Their villages consisted of cedar-bark homes, acorn granaries, and a ceremonial roundhouse. Displaced and decimated by the flood of Euro-American miners and loggers into the area in the mid-nineteenth century, today the federally recognized Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians lives on the Tuolumne Rancheria, purchased in 1910, where members actively preserve their language, lifeways, and culture.

Jamestown was established in the 1840s with Tuolumne County's first gold strike. One of several California Gold Rush boomtowns, Jamestown was surrounded by more than a dozen mines and expanded over the decades to serve its clientele of miners and loggers. Producing over \$2 million in 1897 alone, the prosperous town included stores, assay offices, a number of saloons, and the largest red-light district in the region.

Observing the thriving community's transportation limitations, in 1897 Midwesterner Thomas Bullock, San Francisco banker William Crocker, and Crocker's brother-in-law Prince Andre Poniatowski, a Polish noble of French extraction, formed and incorporated the Sierra Railway Company in order to connect Sierra Nevada timber and mineral resources to the American rail network. In addition to the rail company, the three men also invested heavily in local mining and lumber companies as well as real-estate development firms. With construction of the nearby Oakdale to San Francisco/Sacramento line completed later that year, the Sierra Railway Company and its investors exponentially grew their fortunes.

The owner of an earlier failed Arizona railroad venture, Bullock entered the partnership with three steam locomotives, several miles of rail, and other valuable railroad equipment. With the addition of 15 freight cars, the Sierra Railway began transporting U.S. mail, passengers, and freight. Having formed a working relationship with the prominent Southern Pacific Railroad, the company prospered for the next few decades.

Beginning around World War I, the Sierra Railway Company's profit began an irreversible decline. In addition to a sharp spike in the cost of gold-mining during the war, the concurrent rise of the trucking industry also cut massively into the transport company's profits. Following the close of lumber mills in Tuolumne City and Standard in 1929 and the onset of the national depression, the Sierra Railway Company went into receivership in the early 1930s. Reformed and renamed in 1937 as the Sierra Railroad

Company, incorporated under Crocker Associates, the company limped along for a few more decades, having run its final passenger train in March 1939.

With the loss of passenger service and dwindling freight business, the Sierra Railroad Company supplemented its profits in other ways. For decades, the railroad depot and its stock of locomotives provided Hollywood with dramatic period backdrops, first appearing in the 1919 silent serial, *The Red Glove*. Since then, the location has appeared in over 200 television episodes and movies, particularly after the 1950s when rail lines across the country began replacing steam-powered locomotives with diesel engines (a move the Sierra Railroad Company made in 1955). Additionally, the company began catering to railroad enthusiasts, providing "steam excursions" for small runs.

With the railroad industry on the wane, by 1968, Charles Crocker, a descendant of William Crocker, sought to revive the Jamestown depot as a railroad-themed park. In 1971, "Railtown 1897" opened for business, providing patrons with museum exhibits, gift shops, guided tours of the rail yard, and a number of popular excursion trips: 90-minute trips east and west of Jamestown, evening train rides, wildflower trips, "wine and cheese" trips, and dinner trains. Though popular among attendees, the theme park proved unprofitable and was eventually shuttered in 1980 with the discontinuation of passenger operations.

But, thanks to a 1982 legislative mandate, that year, California State Parks acquired the property, naming and classifying the park the following year. In 1988, Railtown 1897 State Historic Park was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and since 1992, the California State Railroad Museum has assumed responsibility for fundraising, preservation, and interpretive programs.

California State Parks, coordinating with the California State Railroad Museum Foundation, preserves and interprets rare historical resources at Railtown 1897 State Historic Park (**Figures 1 and 2**). In addition to providing access to restored steam-powered locomotives and maintenance facilities, the park likewise provides visitors with interpretive programs focused on these bygone trades and holds several special events throughout the year. The park is day-use only and is open Thursday through Monday except for major holidays.



Figure 1. Sierra Railway No. 3 with roundhouse, September 27, 2011. Catalog # 090-P74398.



Figure 2. Passenger car (interior), September 27, 2011. Catalog # 090-P74397.

Scope and Content

The Railtown 1897 State Historic Park Photographic Collection spans the years 1983 through 2011, with the bulk of the collection covering the years 1983-1991 and

2009-2011. There is a total of 677 cataloged images, including 442 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 148 35mm slides, and 87 born-digital images. Photographs originated primarily from California State Parks staff.

The collection principally depicts the various historic resources contained within the park unit. Images feature various train cars, including steam-powered locomotives, freight cars, rail cars, crane cars, box cars, and cabooses. Additionally, photographs of the fully restored passenger car include interior views that feature a period-era barber chair and other furnishings.

In addition to train cars, the collection also documents the park's painstakingly restored buildings and structures. Images feature interior and exterior views of the maintenance building, the roundhouse, the machine shop, the foreman's house, the train depot, the ticket office, the blacksmith shop, the carpenter shop, the car storage shed, the steam warehouse, the lumber storage shed, the radio shack, the oil room, the Tri Dam building workspace, and the car barn. Interior views include all attendant period-era furnishings and industrial equipment. Images also depict various structures, including the train depot's boardwalk, the sand house, a water tower, a train scale, the roundhouse turntable, various shacks and outbuildings, and railroad tracks winding throughout the park.

The collection also includes images depicting features of the park's non-historical built environment. Images depict various picnic areas, horseshoe pits, restroom facilities, the parking lot, and park signage.

The collection additionally documents important events at the park. Events include the 1983 ribbon-cutting ceremony commemorating the inauguration of the park unit, the 1988 ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the property's listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and multiple living history programs held at various times. These images feature visitors, California State Parks personnel, and volunteers in period garb.

Also included are production stills from the 1989 Hollywood feature film, *Back to the Future III*, one of many films shot on location at the park.

While the Railtown 1897 State Historic Park Photographic Collection thoroughly documents the park unit since its acquisition by the State, it fails to convey the property's history as a functioning train depot. The collection would benefit greatly from the inclusion of historic-era images of the Sierra Railway Company. Additionally, aside from the *Back to the Future III* production stills, the collection does not convey the prominence of the park or its trains within Hollywood. Likewise, the collection does not include any images depicting the "Railtown 1897," Charles Crocker's original railroad-themed park.

Related Collections

Railtown 1897 State Historic Park Collection, California State Parks Archives.

Short Line Enterprises Collection, California State Railroad Museum Library.

Sierra Railroad Photographs, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Sierra Railroad Records, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Sierra Railway/Sierra Railroad Collection, California State Railroad Museum Library.

Stephen E. Drew Equipment Restoration Reports, California State Railroad Museum Library.

Catalog Subject Search Terms

Back to the Future III

Blacksmith shop

Boardwalk

Boxcar(s)

Caboose

Car storage shed

Carpenter shop

Ceremony

Crane

DPR employee(s)

Exterior

Foreman's house

Living history

Locomotive

Lumber storage shed

Machine shop

Maintenance building

Oil room

Parking lot

Passenger car(s)

Picnic area

Production stills

Radio shack

Rail car

Roundhouse

Sand house

Steam warehouse

Ticket office

Train car(s)

Train track(s)

Water tower