

Petaluma and Santa Rosa Trolley History

We Were Blessed

Well, let us set the stage. To start with, Petaluma is as far north as the steamers could go to trade with the valleys farther north which have this perfect “bloomin” weather. They have just the right amount of sun and rain over a rich, loamy soil. That’s what Luther Burbank saw. In addition, he noted that on the third day of a heat spell, we are close enough to the ocean so that fog can be drawn in, to cool things off. Those were the days mind you, when a year’s work depended on the qualities of Mother Nature, not on pesticides genetics and fertilizers. In these valleys, fruit didn’t wither, grain grew plentifully and chickens had a field day. Steamers on the river brought in supplies and took back bounty to the 49ers in San Francisco. Petaluma flourished with its river trade and commerce.

Trouble On The River

The dawn of the 20th Century had all the promise of a new era, but Petaluma’s prosperity was threatened. The San Francisco and North Pacific rail lines and their cargo passed the Petaluma mills and River Steamers heading straight to the Sausalito and Tiburon Ferries. Petaluma’s Riverboat commerce was being driven out of business, but the future held promise in new technology. It was electric. To us that meant electric incubators and electric trains: Trolleys. They were cleaner, quieter and easier to operate and did not require a steam engine. McNear and his associates in the Petaluma Chamber of Commerce set out to break the monopolistic hold of the all-powerful railroad. Farmers were happy to give the right of way and that’s why in 1903 they built the Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railway. The P&SR succeeded in keeping Petaluma commerce alive and vital.

Trolley vs. Railroad

An epic battle of railroad vs. trolley ensued and the locomotives used steam powered fire hoses to blow trolley workers off the tracks. In an article dated March 1, 1904 the Petaluma Argus Courier wrote: “This is a hot time in Santa Rosa. It is the greatest day in the history of the county seat. Since early morning, Santa Rosa has deserted the workbench, forge, counter, desk and even the family fireside and its population of 10,017 souls is congregated at the railroad track watching a red hot fight... Everybody connected with the (rail) road has gone to Santa Rosa to take part... Let ’em scrap, says Petaluma. Sic ’em.” The fight started after an agreed truce for the Christmas season. The electric men started the last connection they needed to complete the Trolley line into Santa Rosa. Symbolically enough, it was where the Trolley had to cross the railroad. The steam engines known as “iron dragons” came charging forward blasting scalding hot steam and boiling water as they chased the trolley workers away from crossing their railroad line. The trolley crew packed up and retreated, giving the impression of defeat. Jubilant with their great success the steam engine workers returned to the Santa Rosa station for water and fuel. The trolley men quickly came back and laid down enough temporary ties to bring a trolley across. Three thousand voices cheered as a trolley car crossed the S.F. & N.P. Line and entered Santa Rosa for the first time!

Trolley Supports Petaluma for 50 Years

The track from Petaluma to Santa Rosa, Sebastopol and Forestville quickly became one of the busiest little railroads in America. It hauled up to ten thousand carloads of produce and products each year and in addition to that a quarter of a million passengers. The results of this commerce enabled Petaluma to construct the buildings and architectural resources we treasure today.

Someday they’ll make a movie about our brave, industrious pioneers and how the Trolley saved Petaluma. The Trolley which was so important to the past could be instrumental to us now. We are making the Trolley happen again, 100 years later.

This and further information can be found in Alan Tacy’s History of P&S.R.