

As soon as the golden spike that hammered in the railroad tie in Utah in 1869 connected both sides of the country, Livermore was a part of that connection. The Central/Southern Pacific train line left San Francisco, came south and up through Niles Canyon, then through Pleasanton and Livermore and over the Sierra, eventually changing to the Rio Grande line at Salt Lake. Silk weaving factories in the northeast states could now obtain raw silk from the Orient much more expeditiously—shipped to the west coast and then rushed by train cross-country instead of traveling by ship around Cape Horn. The *Livermore Enterprise* mentioned a train of 16 cars, including three of silk and 13 of tea, that passed through Livermore in October 1875.

The railroad companies did not usually want newspaper publicity because the silk was worth so much money that it made an inviting target for thieves. A 1905 silk train of seven cars that left San Francisco for New York had cargo valued by Wells Fargo at \$1,000,000. Because the shipments were so

expensive, they were also extremely expensive for the railroad companies to insure. Thus, the faster the silk could travel to its destination, the better for the railroads. Silk trains had the right of way over the fastest passenger trains. The bales of raw silk were unloaded very quickly into special box cars directly at the wharf. Three hours was the average time to unload the silk bales from the ships onto trains. In another 85 hours or so, the bales arrived in the New York City area. According to Virgil Staff, author of several railroad histories, the excitement of the fast silks whizzing through the town of Portola up in the Sierra brought “everyone and his dog” out to watch. The earliest engines burned wood; later, they burned coal. The early sailing ships that crossed the Pacific with silk became steamers by the 1920s.

Between 1923 and 1929, the three most important ports for silk were Seattle, Vancouver, and San Francisco. During the 1920s, about 20 silk trains per month crossed the continent. Most silk trains probably traveled north

over the Benecia Bridge after it was finished in 1930, although perhaps a few still came through Livermore just to keep the thieves guessing. Henrietta Greer, who lived on Patterson Pass Road, remembered a silk train that derailed in the Altamont hills about 1930. I found records of train wrecks about that time, but none of them was identified as a silk train. Henrietta was the first person to tell me about silk trains. She said, “Quite an excitement arose in town when the silk trains came through.”

The silk cars were not cleaned on the outside, so they were not conspicuous. Entire trains sometimes consisted of silk-tea cars, often 8 to 10 cars long, with a car at the end for the special armed guards. Raw silk is not perishable, but certain precautions still had

to be made in shipping. It had to be stored in a clean place free of sharp edges or rough surfaces. It had to be protected from dampness—silk can pick up over 30% of its weight in water. If this should happen, the swelling could break the packaging of the bales. Around the turn of the century, Southern Pacific built 30 silk and tea box-carriage cars in Sacramento. Each had a curved canvas roof and an 80,000 pound capacity. My husband and I drove up to the Railtown 1897 State Historic Park in Jamestown in 2003 and visited the old roundhouse and various machine and repair shops. We had been told by the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento that a silk and tea car built between 1903 and 1904 was here at this site, and sure enough, we managed to find it. Because of

the angle of the sun and automobiles in the parking lot, we had a difficult time taking a good photo, but you can see the curved roof and how ordinary the car looks—nothing to excite a thief. Originally, of course, it was painted with the Southern Pacific logo and colors.

The East Coast around New York City had the monopoly on silk mills. In 1909 the City itself had 276 mills; Paterson, New Jersey, had 259; and another 301 were located in smaller towns in Pennsylvania. I was surprised to learn that Reading, Pennsylvania, near where my sister lives, had a silk mill. Even San Francisco had a silk mill for a short time.

The 1920s saw an increased demand for silk as women raised their hemlines and exposed their legs—silk stockings

became the rage. Approximately 750,000 bales were shipped through San Francisco from 1924 to 1930, more than 20% of all rail traffic annually through the port. The Market Crash of 1929 affected the silk trade disastrously. Instead of entire train loads of silk, ordinary freight trains carried two or three silk cars along with other freight. The Panama Canal gradually became a cheaper alternative route to the East Coast, the advent of World War II interrupted all shipping, and nylon was invented. Silk trains disappeared.

In 1930, John A. Thompson wrote an article titled “The Flight of the Silk” that ended with these words: “Strange, isn’t it, that behind such frivolities as summer frocks and silk stockings, ribbons and garters, there should lurk a melodramatic setting of . . . the ever-present menace of desperate bandits and armed trains hurtling through the country at dizzying speed?” Of course, traveling the fabulous Silk Road of the Orient was also fraught with danger.

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Do You Remember?



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SILK TRAINS