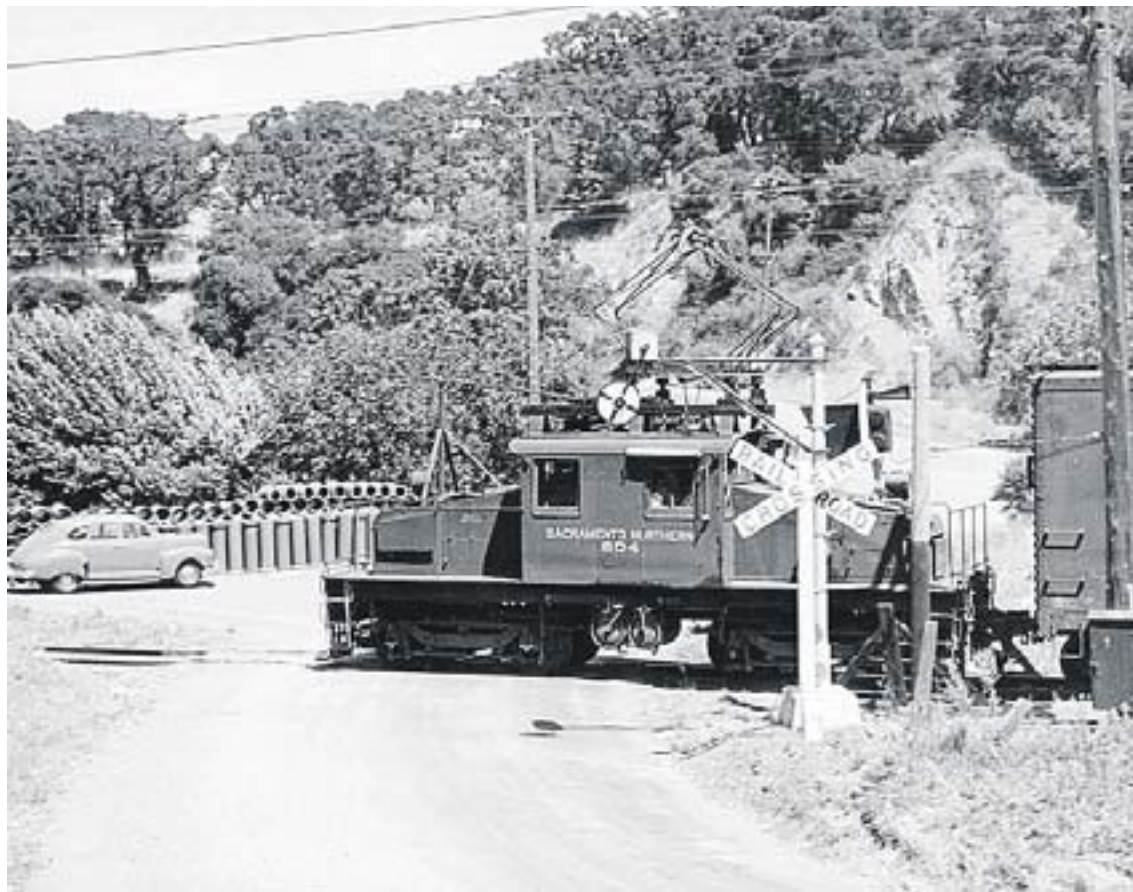


Where did Roger Take the Picture?

One Man's Quest to Find Answers of Forgotten Railroad

By Sophie Braccini



Roger Heller's picture

Stuart J. Swiedler is somewhat obsessive. Obsessive and passionate. What makes him ultimately unique, is his inclination to share his quest with others. For three years now, seven days a week, seven hours a day, he has been researching, collecting, and analyzing pictures of the East Bay area to better understand local history and to show the transformations of the local landscape.

Audience members filled the community room of the Moraga Library on March 22 (some audience members sitting on side tables, others standing in doorways) to hear Swiedler's presentation. What sparked Thursday's fever? Swiedler's haunting quest to answer one question: "Where did Roger take the picture?"

Local resident Roger Heller has a collection of pictures of the trains and tracks from the past that used to cross the East Bay. The specific picture noted at Thursday's presentation is of a Sacramento Northern Railroad train running on tracks that seem to traverse familiar East Bay hills. But

which hills specifically?

The Sacramento Northern Railroad went through Lamorinda by way of Montclair and Canyon, and traversed Moraga and Lafayette before reaching Walnut Creek. It was built at the beginning of the 20th century to link San Francisco to Chico, via Sacramento, for both passengers and freight. It continued functioning in our area until February, 1957. Passenger transportation ceased in 1941.

Through a slide presentation, Swiedler took the audience on a railroad trip along the tracks that crossed the East Bay from Montclair to Moraga, from the '20s to present day, looking at every crossing to see if it could be "where Roger took the picture."

The slides showed a fascinating transformation of the local landscape: houses slowly invaded the wild hills, roads were carved, tunnels were dug. Photos of old newspaper articles underscored the land use battles that shook the East Bay at the time.

Finally, after going over the hills

from Oakland to Canyon, passing the Moraga School, the Barn and Saint Mary's College, audience members were shown the last crossing in Moraga at Bollinger Canyon. That's where Roger took the picture, Swiedler concluded.

Someone in the audience knew the answer from the start. "I remember that train and I recognized the crossing right away," said Moraga Historical Society Recording Secretary Susan Sperry, but she didn't spoil the surprise for others. Sperry and her family have been living in Bollinger Canyon for years and her father used to have a farm there.

After the presentation, members of the Society not only congratulated Swiedler on his monumental research, but also shared their personal stories about the train and/or the area.

You can see some of Swiedler's photos at Eastbayhillsproject.org or access photos of the train at bayareairailfan.org. Swiedler is scheduled to speak again May 23 at the Lafayette Presbyterian Church.

provided



Stuart Swiedler shows a picture of the train running by the Moraga Barn.

Photo Sophie Braccini

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