

The Santa Fe Right of Way in Berkeley

By Susan Schwartz, Friends of Five Creeks (slightly revised from 2006 handout for Berkeley Historical Soc.)

Space in cities is often recycled in unexpected ways. The roughly 40-foot-wide strip of land running 3.2 miles north-south through Berkeley's flatlands may be seeing such a metamorphosis.

In the 1880s, backers set out to build a narrow-gauge railway from San Francisco Bay to mines across the Sierra Nevada. From the waterfront near the Oakland-Emeryville border, south of today's Bay Bridge, this California and Nevada Railway headed north to cross the Berkeley hills via the valley of San Pablo Creek (in today's El Sobrante). It continued up the creek southeast to Orinda -- which became a popular weekend rail destination. Undercapitalized and plagued by slides, the effort stalled there. Trains stopped running by the late 1890s.

As the new century began, though, interest in the route revived. Francis "Borax" Smith, out to link streetcars and ferries into an East-Bay-wide transit net, acquired the California and Nevada's abandoned water access for the Key System pier. The Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad had stretched north from Los Angeles through the San Joaquin Valley to a toehold on the Bay in Point Richmond. The California & Nevada route offered an easy branch to Oakland. From 1904, this Santa Fe Railroad "Oakland Local" hauled freight and passengers through Berkeley, stopping at the mission-style station at 1310 University.

Berkeley industry remained concentrated in Oceanview, where the older Union Pacific line had run along the waterfront since 1878. Still, a half-dozen lumberyards soon edged the tracks in the post-earthquake boom. A variety of industries, from baking to chemicals, clustered near the Santa Fe yard south of University. The City of Berkeley consolidated its scattered shops here starting in 1914; a spur track brought supplies by the carload. The Tudor-style buildings designed by City Architect Walter Ratcliff saw the final transition from horse stalls to truck bays. They remain in use. The brick and frame industrial buildings at Addison and Bonar housed, among other companies, American Photoplayer, which made musical instruments that movie theaters could use to mimic an orchestra. The advent of "talkies" in the 1920s ended demand. At Hearst Street, California Faience made tiles that exemplified the arts-and-crafts style -- most famous are the tiles at Hearst Castle in San Simeon.

Most of the land along the Santa Fe tracks gradually filled in with homes, though the railroad's noise and smoke assured that most were working class. Queen of the neighboring subdivisions was San Pablo Park, "Lots \$100 down and \$10 per month" surrounding 15-acre San Pablo Park, Berkeley's first public park, established in 1906.

The automobile doomed rail passenger traffic, and the Post-WW-II Interstate Highway system left rail freight struggling. By the 1960s, it was clear that the Santa Fe was on its way out. Berkeley tried three times to pass a bond issue to acquire the right-of-way. Finally, in 1979, the railroad gave up and essentially donated its 20 acres of Berkeley right of way to the city, retaining a few valuable parcels like the railroad station.

In Albany and El Cerrito, BART took over the former rail line. Both cities developed the land under tracks as a recreation trail, the Ohlone Greenway. Several "greening" projects have followed, including Friends of Five Creeks' restorations at Cerrito Creek and Codornices Creek, where volunteers removed invasive, planted natives, and built the observation railing in 2000.

In Berkeley, though, residents taxed themselves to put BART underground, and the tunnel turned east along Hearst toward downtown. A Berkeley task force and then the City Council rejected the trail idea for the right-of-way, calling instead for a mixture of parks, community gardens, housing, and sale of bits and pieces to abutting property owners with odd-shaped lots. A bond issue passed in 1977 provided funds to develop Strawberry Creek Park, Cedar-Rose Park, and today's ball courts on the right-of-way. Berkeley's pioneer creek-daylighting project unearthed Strawberry Creek from the former railroad culvert in Strawberry Creek Park in 1986 -- The "rocks" lining the bank are pieces of the old culvert. Six units of low-income housing were built between Dwight and Channing, and a few small triangles were sold.

North of the North Berkeley BART station, community gardens were developed with public money and private effort, starting in the early 1980s and in a later wave of interest in the late 1990s. Under the guidance of the late Karl Linn, these gardens added ecologically-oriented buildings and imaginative public art and interpretive signage. Chia, a native-garden group, is planting coastal prairie vegetation along the former rail line.

More garden projects have blossomed. Berkeley Youth Alternatives has a multi-use garden south of Strawberry Creek Park. In 2004, Spiral Gardens opened its “Community Food Security Project,” a nursery and urban farm, at Sacramento and Oregon, the south end of the Berkeley portion of the right-of-way. The Berkeley Community Orchard dreams of an orchard on the two blocks Derby-Ward-Carlton.

In 2002, Berkeley revised its General Plan, changing the policy of mixed use on the Greenway to one of recreation, open space, and development of a bicycle-pedestrian greenway. Berkeley Path Wanderers Association and Berkeley Partners for Parks helped bring about this change. Berkeley Partners for Parks was instrumental in obtaining a state grant to build three blocks of the trail, from University to Delaware (delayed by rain but scheduled to be completed in 2006).

Berkeley Path Wanderers persuaded the city to open the fence that blocks the right of way at Lincoln, opening the trail 9 miles, to recently restored Baxter Creek on the El Cerrito-Richmond border. Richmond is extending trail on its own portions of the old Right of Way. In its Iron Triangle area, the “Berryland” nonprofit project is working to green the greenway by raising local food.

Berkeley Montessori School, now occupying the old Santa Fe station, plans to open the trail from University south to Addison and Strawberry Creek Park. Berkeley Partners for Parks is working with the Berkeley Community Gardening Collective toward a plan for the remaining “missing links” south of University.

Thus, the Santa Fe Right of Way may become a Berkeley to Richmond pedestrian-bicycle trail more than 10 miles long -- with community parks and gardens strung along it like beads on a necklace.

Right, Santa Fe Right of Way route through Berkeley. Farther south, rails followed Sacramento St. The route either is open or can be followed closely on quiet streets.

Below, 1880s map of proposed California & Nevada Railway.

