



Bay Area residents think of the town of Tracy as a bedroom community, as did I, so I was pleasantly surprised (and busy!) when I visited Tracy and then less surprised when I found that, in 2014, the Union Pacific Railroad officially designated Tracy as Train Town USA. Our exploration of Tracy's rail history is arranged in chronological order in this Geolink, not geographically, so we'll jump around a bit to stay on a historical timeline. The story begins with the track in the foreground, which was the first of two separate Western Pacific railroads, both of which are in Tracy. The first WP was formed in December 1862 by a group associated with the San Francisco & San Jose Railroad (1864) to build a railroad connecting San Jose to Sacramento with the plan that the first transcontinental railroad would follow the WP from Sacramento to San Jose, where passengers and freight would continue to San Francisco on the SF&SJ. In October 1864, the Central Pacific Railroad assigned all its rights under the Pacific Railway Act to the WP for the route between Sacramento and San Jose, including this location in Tracy. In 1866, the first 20 miles from San Jose had been completed when funding problems halted construction. Part of the difficulty was that federal land grants were not available where Mexican land grants had previously been made.

By 1867 the CP determined that the route via San Jose to San Francisco was too long and that it would be better to change to a route to Oakland and from there use ferries from the CP's Oakland Pier to San Francisco. The CP bought the WP and construction started again in the spring of 1867. The railroad was completed through this location and in 1869 arrived at San Leandro, where it joined the local San Francisco & Alameda Railroad (not shown separately on the map). The first transcontinental train to reach San Francisco Bay arrived at the SF&A's Alameda Pier on September 6, 1869, and the passengers took the SF&A ferry to San Francisco. Two months later the rail connection to the local San Francisco & Oakland Railroad (not shown separately on the map) was in place and the transcontinental trains now ran through Oakland instead of Alameda. In 1870, the WP was absorbed into the CP and the CP and Southern Pacific Railroad came under common control; in 1885 the two lines actually consolidated in a new company was called Southern Pacific.

Tracy was initially not an important rail location and Lathrop, located 10 miles northeast of Tracy and at the junction between the WP (1869) and the SP (1876) line to southern California, became the local rail center. The volume of business being handled by the railroad required a station for helper engines at the foot of the Altamont Hills, so a station named Ellis was built 3 miles southwest of current Tracy. In 1878, the SP completed a new rail line, the San Pablo & Tulare Railroad, from Oakland around the north finger of San Francisco Bay, through Martinez to connect with the WP (1869) line east of Altamont Pass at the new junction of Tracy, named for SP employee Lathrop J. Tracy. The SP had no reason for continuing the station at Ellis and the railroad facilities were moved to Tracy.

Northward view of the City of Tracy Transit Center, which is a newer structure at the historic location of the Tracy Depot. The track in the foreground is the WP (1869), but the track may have been re-aligned in this area and originally may have run closer to the current building and maybe even north of it, but I could find little information on the depot or any re-alignments.



Northeast view at same location as previous. The bolted WP (1869) line is on the left and the parked cars farther left are for the City of Tracy Transit Center. The switch and curved track to the right is a 1.5-mile-long spur.





Westward view of the WP (1869) 3 miles southwest of downtown Tracy, near the former location of Ellis. The Coast Range foothills are in the distance and Altamont Pass lies 15 rail miles from this location. The rusty tracks end 3 miles ahead, and I think the facilities in the distance are/were its last customers.







Same location as previous, eastward view of the rusty WP (1869) tracks and the outskirts of Tracy.



The future location of Tracy was just a place along the WP (1869) until 1878, when the SP completed the San Pablo & Tulare Railroad, from Oakland around the north finger of San Francisco Bay, through Martinez to connect with the WP (1869) at the new junction of Tracy; that new junction is represented today by the switch in this westward view a quarter mile west of the Tracy Depot. The straight track in the foreground is the WP (1869). The branch that curves to the right is the SP&T (1878). The SP&T approached Oakland from the northeast via the north finger of San Francisco Bay, which is a water gap where the Sacramento River cuts through the Coast Range. This gap provides the only water-level route from California's Central Valley to the coast, thus avoiding the climb over Altamont Pass. This junction made Tracy the important rail center in the area and the WP (1869)'s route via Altamont Pass, the straight track beyond the junction, became a secondary route between the East Bay and the Central Valley.

I think this junction was re-aligned at some point in the past. The right turn in the photo (toward the north) goes immediately into a left turn to head northwestward out of town. Two curves in opposite directions make no sense, and aerial photos show the northwest-trending track to the right of the photo project southeastward straight to the Tracy Depot (previous photo). I infer that the original junction was at the location of the Depot and was later moved to this location, maybe to move the junction away from automobile traffic around the Transit Center.





Northwestward view of the SP&T (1878) a half mile northwest of its junction with the WP (1869). The track is very rusty and I could find no documentation that the line was used in recent years.





The next chapter in Tracy's railroad history was the construction of the SP's West Side Line. This main line route was completed in 1891 and extended southward from this location on the WP (1869) through Los Banos and Oxalis on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley then eastward to Fresno, where the line connected with the SP (1876) main line to southern California. The new line was the fastest and least expensive route to Los Angeles, and on March 1, 1894, the railroad headquarters at Lathrop, at the junction of the WP (1869) and the SP (1876) main line to southern California, were moved to Tracy. Construction of a roundhouse started in Tracy in 1896. The SP's overnight Owl passenger train operated over this line between San Francisco and Los Angeles into the 1960's. The SP abandoned the section of the West Side Line between Los Banos and Oxalis in the 1990's. The California Northern Railroad now operates the northern section of the West Side Line from Tracy to Los Banos to transport agricultural goods.

Westward view at downtown Tracy. The City of Tracy Transit Center (location of original Tracy Depot) is in the distance along the WP (1869) and the junction with the SP&T (1878) is out of sight just beyond the Transit Center. The track farthest from the viewer is a WP (1869) siding, the next closer track is the WP (1869) main line, the closest straight track is the siding for the SP West Side Line (1891), and the switch and curved track in the foreground is the west branch of the wye for the SP West Side Line (1891).





Northward view of the west branch of the wye for the West Side Line at downtown Tracy. A caboose and some box cars are on the WP (1869) siding.





The west branch of the wye for the SP West Side Line (1891), with some sort of an old track-side foundation. The UP box car is on the WP (1869) siding. Note the rusty track; there is really no place worth going westward from here by rail.





Eastward view of the west branch of the wye for the West Side Line, showing the same caboose and box cars as the previous two photos. These old cars are on the WP (1869) siding, and farther out are the WP (1869) main line, the siding for the SP West Side Line (1891), and finally the west branch of the wye for the SP West Side Line (1891)(curved track in the distance).





Eastward view at the wye for the West Side Line, the nearby box car in the upper right is the easternmost box car on the WP (1869) siding (previous photos). The siding branches to the right onto the WP (1869) main line and to the left onto a spur that heads 3 miles due north from this location.





Northeastward view at the wye for the SP West Side Line (1891). The track in the foreground is the siding for the wye, the track to its left is the WP (1869) main line with a switch to its siding (with caboose and box cars out of the sight to the left), and the curved track to the left is the spur that heads 3 miles north from this location. The two sidings in the right distance are for the east branch of the SP West Side Line (1891) wye, which today is the busy interchange between the California Northern Railroad, which operates on the SP West Side Line (1891) line, and UP, which operates on the WP (1869) line.





Southward view of the same crossing for the 3-mile-long spur as in the previous photo. The WP (1869) main line is in the distance. This junction may once have been a complete wye with a switch in just this location and an east branch about where the puddle is to the left of the tracks; the next photo is a closer view of the puddle.





The puddle in the left foreground is the same one as in the previous photo. Note the curved right-turn-only road, which is unusual for this minor side street and could mark the prior alignment of the east branch of a wye for the spur.





Northward view of the 3-mile-long spur, same location as the previous photo. The spur has numerous shorter spurs to numerous industrial facilities, active and inactive.



Now we are in the center of the wye for the SP West Side Line (1891) looking southeastward. The southeast tip of the wye, where it splits into the east and west branches of the wye, are barely visible in the distance. The straight track extends into the distance and continues straight onto the alignment of the SP West Side Line (1891) and ends at this old loading facility in the center of the wye. I suspect that this track is the original SP West Side Line (1891) and a smaller wye once branched from this point onto the WP (1869) just behind the viewer. The larger wye would he have been built at a later date and the older wye replaced by this loading facility.





A few steps farther southeast within the wye for the SP West Side Line (1891) looking southeastward. The straight track in the foreground is the old alignment of the SP West Side Line (1891) and the curved track that merges with it in the distance is the east branch of the larger wye. The west branch of the wye merges with the straight track just out of sight in the distance.





Northwestward view of the SP West Side Line (1891) 10 miles southeast of Tracy, where the line passes through mile after mile of groves. Note the fresh (unrusted) steel on the track, a sign of activity on today's California Northern Railroad.





Southeastward view of the SP West Side Line (1891) (now California Northern), same location as previous (10 miles southeast of Tracy), where the line passes under California Highway 132. The line continues another 50 miles to Los Banos, beyond which the West Side Line tracks are gone.



For the next chapter in Tracy's railroad history we come to this location at Carbona, California, 3 miles due south of downtown Tracy and the WP (1869) junctions with the SP&T (1878) and SP West Side Line (1891). The Alameda & San Joaquin Railroad was organized May 1, 1895, to haul coal from deposits in Corral Hollow Valley. The 37-mile line was completed July 1, 1896, and ran from the end of track at the coal town of Tesla, California, northeastward through this location at Carbona to the Stockton Channel, where coal was transferred from the A&SJ to barges and river boats. The coal traffic never met expectations and the line struggled. In 1903, the second Western Pacific Railroad (1909), backed by UP interests, purchased the A&SJ to utilize the portion of the road from Carbona (this location) to Stockton. The 13 miles of the A&SJ (1896) from Carbona to Tesla became a coal branch of the WP (1909) and was eventually cut back to a quarry a half mile southwest of this location at Carbona.

In this southwestward view, the straight track that extends into the distance is on the A&SJ (1896) alignment. On this side of the curve, the tracks are gone from the A&SJ (1896) alignment, which continued straight toward the viewer (no curve or switch) to the location of the concrete pad and projects northeastward to warehouses parallel to the alignment and then straight onto the active WP (1909) grade (which uses the A&SJ grade northeast of Carbona). The curved track is later construction that leads to a wye for the WP (1909) Tesla Branch. Note the remnants of a switch and some track at the far end of the curve; the switch and track are on the A&SJ grade, which apparently became a spur after the WP (1909) re-alignments.





In this southward view, the near switch with missing track is the tip of the wye connecting the WP (1909) with the Tesla Branch. The farther switch is a spur to some warehouses, and beyond that the track curves southwestward (to the right) onto the A&SJ (1896) alignment (previous photo).



Northward view of the Carbona wye, same switch as seen in the previous photo.





Northward view of the Carbona wye, the switch in the previous photo is now in the distance, the nearer switch is a spur to the warehouse in the distance.



Southwestward view of the east branch of the Carbona wye, which was built at the time or soon after the A&SJ (1896) was re-aligned to accommodate the WP (1909).





Northeastward view of the east branch of the Carbona wye (curved track on right) where it merges with a siding of the WP (1909), which is the higher track in the distance. The curved main line in the distance marks the transition of the WP (1909) alignment from the northeast-southwest alignment of the A&SJ to the east-west alignment of WP (1909) new grading in the foreground.





Southwestward view of the east branch of the Carbona wye (curved track on left), where it merges with a siding of the WP (1909) and some cars are stored.





Southwestward view a few step from the previous location. The WP (1909) main line is in the foreground, turning from its southwestward A&SJ alignment to its westward new alignment. The next track to the left is a siding, and the siding with cars stored is for the Carbona wye.



Eastward view at Carbona. The cars are stored on the siding for the Carbona wye, the WP (1909) main line and siding are in the left distance. Tile-roofed new residential housing, for which most people know Tracy, is visible over the wall in the distance.





The west branch of the Carbona wye is in the street in the foreground, cars are stored on the siding, and the WP (1909) main line and sidings are in the distance.



Southeast view of the west branch of the Carbona wye and its junction with the siding.





Same junction as previous, looking west, the west branch of the Carbona wye is to the left and its siding is in the foreground with an abandoned switch.





The west branch of the Carbona wye is in the right foreground, and the WP (1909) main line and siding converge to one track on the left.





Westward view of the west end of the Carbona wye, same location as previous. All tracks converge to one track in the distance.



A westbound train on the WP (1909) a mile west of Carbona.





This is our last stop in Tracy and a good place to talk about the second WP. In 1903, a second Western Pacific Railroad was formed to build a line between Oakland and Salt Lake City, which was completed in 1909 to compete with the SP (former Central Pacific) transcontinental. The westernmost part of the WP (1909), the route from Sacramento to Oakland with a branch to San Jose, closely parallels the original WP (1869), including this westward view 1 mile south on the WP (1869) alignment and 2 miles west of Carbona. In 1979, the SP (successor to the CP) obtained trackage rights over the WP (1909) to take advantage of the gentler grade over Altamont Pass compared to the WP (1869) crossing, and then abandoned its WP (1869) track over Altamont Pass. The WP (1909) crosses Altamont Pass about 12 rail miles west of here; note the foothills of the Coast Range in the distance. The WP (1909) has modern welded track and is given no chance to rust under UP trains (UP is successor to the SP and both WP's).

Thus is the georailfan history of the UP's Train Town USA.