



Yuma, Arizona, has been a key crossing point on the Colorado River for centuries. The “Yuma Crossing” is the most downstream point at which the Colorado River cuts through bedrock. The land west of Yuma is the Colorado River delta, where in the geologic past the river “distributaries” (as opposed to “tributaries”) created fingers of river channels that fan out westward and have each been the active channel of the lowermost Colorado River. The current active channel goes to the Sea of Cortez, but has flowed from Yuma to the Salton Sea as recently as 1450. Today, thanks to massive damming and diversion of the river, the river no longer flows to the Sea of Cortez and nearly all of the water now flows to the Salton Trough for irrigation, thus maintaining water in the Salton Sea, which was dry before diversions were built. Whereas the river north and south of Yuma has broad floodplains that were difficult to cross, the bedrock at Yuma channelized the river to only a few hundred feet wide and offered firm banks. Spaniards who wanted the Crossing to access coastal California from Mexico during the California Mission Period (late 1700’s) battled the local Quechan Indians for control and lost. With the discovery of gold in California in 1848, gold-seekers began crossing and the Quechans established a commercial ferry operation. In response to some Indian violence, the new California government unsuccessfully sent a force of 142 men to avenge the death of a white ferry man. In 1850, US Army troops reached the Colorado River to build an army post at the river crossing and set up “Fort Yuma” on the western, California, side of the river. Wagon trains tried to bring barley and other food to the Fort from San Diego and then later by schooners around the Baja California, but all were unsuccessful. A big steamer called the Invincible tried to sail with cargo upriver but got stranded. Fort Yuma was abandoned in 1851, but small force was left to defend the ferry area and the camp was called Camp Independence, which was later reinforced.

Modern transportation at Yuma Crossing dates to 1846 and Cooke’s Wagon Road, which generally followed the Gila River east from Yuma to the continental divide in New Mexico. The road was named after Captain Philip St. George Cooke, who constructed the route for the Mormon Battalion’s supply wagons during the Mexican-American War. The Southern Pacific Railroad reached Yuma in 1877 and built a railroad bridge at the Crossing, which was a milestone in the SP’s rush to El Paso and completion of the southern transcontinental railroad line. The general route of Cooke’s road became the east-west territorial Road by 1909, and in 1914 the Ocean to Ocean Highway Bridge was constructed in Yuma. In 1925, the route became U.S. Highway 80.

The bridge in the background being crossed by this east-bound container train is the second SP bridge across the Colorado River at Yuma; the 1877 bridge was a short distance downstream (left). The train mostly blocks our view of the 1914-vintage Ocean to Ocean Highway (later U.S. Highway 80) Bridge, which is next to the railroad bridge. The train is passing under modern Interstate 8, which crosses over the Colorado River, the old highway, and the railroad.



Closer view, in the westward direction, of the second SP bridge across the Colorado River at Yuma and the 1914 highway bridge next to it. Note the steep bank of the river, which keep it in a narrow channel at Yuma, and the cut in bedrock to maintain the rail grade on the far (California) side.



The U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation built the Yuma Valley Railway in 1914. The railroad was part of the Interior Department's irrigation and flood control project along the lower Colorado River; the YV constructed and was built upon a levee designed to prevent the river from flooding the newly irrigated lands on the Colorado River floodplain south of Yuma. The YV originally extended 25 miles from Yuma to the Arizona-Mexico border town of San Luis. In 1947 the YV was leased to and operated by the SP, which abandoned the last 9 miles. The YV operated into the 1980s and became a heritage railroad that operated an excursion passenger train until 2005. Some of the YV equipment was relocated to the Virginia & Truckee Railroad in 2013.

The YV tracks in the foreground join the SP mainline, which is being worked by a container train. The rough building in the left distance is the Yuma Territorial Prison, destination of the SP's "3:10 to Yuma." The paved road crossed by the YV tracks is U.S. Highway 80, the rail and auto bridges across the Colorado River are just left of the image, and Interstate 8 can be seen on the right.



Yuma Valley Railway, with the bridges of U.S. Highway 80, the SP, and Interstate 8 in the distance.



An old Pacific Fruit Express car beside the SP (now UP) tracks in Yuma. Note both SP and UP logos.



Southern Pacific Locomotive #2521 is on static display near the SP-YV wye. The 2-8-0 Consolidation-type engine was built by Baldwin Locomotive Works in 1907, placed in service by SP in 1908, and has since pulled passenger and freight trains an estimated 2.5 million miles around the Southwest.