



In the late 1800's both the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad had interests in building lines north from San Francisco to Humboldt County to transport logs south. As plans went forward it became clear that only one railroad would be profitable in the Eel River Canyon, so the SP and AT&SF entered into an agreement and in 1906 merged 42 railroad companies between Marin and Humboldt Bay to create one railroad line stretching from Schellville, California to Eureka. The two companies constructed the final stretch of railroad under the name San Francisco & Eureka Railroad through the unstable Eel River canyon, which was completed in 1914 with a "golden spike" ceremony. The SP controlled the southern end of the line from Willits south to Schellville and the AT&SF controlled the northern end from Willits to Eureka. There were also dozens of miles of narrow gauge trackage in Marin, which was controlled by SP, and together these roads were operated as the Northwestern Pacific Railroad.

In 1929, the NWP became a full SP subsidiary. Freight service on the NWP picked up in the 1950's due to demand for lumber during the post-war housing boom. By 1980, freight was still running in the SF&E-built Eel River Canyon between Willits and Eureka, at that time the most expensive stretch of rail line to be operational and maintained in the United States, and in 1983 the SP unsuccessfully tried to shut the line down. In 1984, the SP sold the line north of Willits to Bryan Whipple, who ran it as the Eureka Southern Railroad but was bankrupt within several years. In 1989, the North Coast Railroad Authority was founded to save the NWP from total abandonment. In 1992, what was left of the Eureka Southern was sold to the NCRA, who operated it as North Coast Railroad until 1995, when severe flooding of the Eel River led to an almost total washout. In 1996, the NCRA took over operations of the line south of Willits and the "new" NWP ran from 1996 until 1998, when the line was shut down due to financial and safety issues. In 2009, the NCRA began to rebuild and repair the NWP between Schellville and Windsor, about 50 miles south of Willits.

Willits was first reached by rail when the California Northwestern completed its line to Willits in 1902, which was the end of the line until the SF&E completed the connection through the Eel River Canyon in 1914. In 2015, the NWP depot and rail yard in Willits only sees traffic from the California Northwestern branch line, where a diesel passenger consists awaits excursion duties. The NWP mainline in the foreground has not seen traffic from the north since 1995, when the SF&E-built Eel River section was closed, or from the south since 1998, when the southern section of the line was closed.



South of the Willits Depot, the NWP mainline is to the right (east) and the siding for the CW branch is on the left.



Today's California Western excursion railroad had its origins in the Fort Bragg Redwood Company's Fort Bragg Railroad, built in 1885 to carry redwood logs from the dense forests to a newly built lumber mill located 6.6 miles to the west at coastal Fort Bragg, California. In 1905, three years after the California Northwestern Railroad completed its line to Willits, the FB was renamed the California Western Railroad & Navigation Company, and in 1911 the CWR&NC route was completed to its total length of 40 miles, roughly following the Noyo River, to interchange with the NWP at Willits.

In 1947, the railroad name was shortened to the California Western Railroad. Union Lumber and its CW came under the ownership of various lumber producers, including Boise Cascade in 1969 and later Georgia-Pacific, and in June 1987 the CW was sold to the Kyle Railways subsidiary Mendocino Coast Railway. No longer able to make a profit when the GP mill closed, Kyle Railways opted to sell the financially starved CW, and in 2003 the CW was rescued when it was bought by the Sierra Railroad. Today the CW or "Skunk Train" is owned and operated by Mendocino Railway.

This southward view shows the overgrown NWP mainline on the left and the CW branch heading to the west toward Fort Bragg on the right.



Just west of the Willits wye, the CW features an old water tower and bridge over a small creek.