



In 1901, the California & Northern Railroad was built from Eureka 10 miles northeastward along Arcata Bay to the lumber center of Arcata. The C&N made obsolete the steamboats that had for decades carried lumber across Arcata Bay from Arcata to Eureka. The C&N connected the isolated Eel River & Eureka Railroad (1884) with two isolated lumber railroads that led to Arcata: the Eureka & Klamath River Railroad (whose predecessor roads date to 1875 and was later incorporated into the Oregon & Eureka), and the Arcata & Mad River Railroad (whose predecessor roads date to the 1854 Union Wharf & Plank Walk Company, which was the first working railroad in California and the Southwest). The ER&E, C&N, and the Arcata roads remained isolated from the national rail network until 1914 when the AT&SF/SP-controlled San Francisco & Eureka Railroad was completed through the Eel River Canyon. In 1918, all these railroads were combined into the Northwestern Pacific Railroad. In 1995, severe flooding of the Eel River washed out too much of the line to justify repairs and the NWP north of the Eel River, including the original ER&E, C&N, O&E, and A&MR, have again been isolated and remain inactive.

Southward view of the inactive C&N (1901)/NWP a half mile south of Arcata.



This location in Arcata is where California and Southwest railroading began. On December 15, 1854 the Union Wharf & Plank Walk Company built a pier into Humboldt Bay at Arcata to load lumber schooners. The wooden rails overlain with strap iron laid on that walkway were built to an unusual narrow gauge of 3 ft 9 1/2 in (45.5 inches) apart. A year later, 2 miles of track had been laid inland from the wharf. There were no locomotives; instead, horses pulled the cars across the narrow gauge tracks. In 1875, the railroad was renamed the Union Plank Walk & Railroad Company. The wooden rails were faced with iron and a small steam locomotive, named the *Black Diamond*, towed lumber out onto the wharf from the nearby mill. In 1881, the Arcata & Mad River Railroad assumed control of the line and over the next two years replaced the strap iron rail with 35-pound-per-yard steel rail and extended the line 10 miles up the Mad River to the town of North Fork (now Korbel). This 10-mile-long road was built to the "standard" narrow gauge of 36 inches and is the 1883 road shown on the Southwest Railroad History Map. I could find no trace of any of these roads in Arcata, but the 1883 A&MR alignment crossed the current tracks in the bushes in the distance.

There was another railroad in Arcata when the C&N arrived in 1901. In 1875, John Vance built a sawmill near the Mad River community of Essex (5 miles north of Arcata) and built the Humboldt & Mad River Railroad to transport lumber the 5 miles from the sawmill to Humboldt Bay for loading onto ships. In 1893, Vance constructed a new sawmill in Samoa, 7 miles southwest of Arcata, on a sand spit and extended his railroad south to the final southern terminus at Samoa and also extended the line farther north. In a 1903 deal with the Southern Pacific, the H&MR became the Oregon & Eureka Railroad, which built north in stages and reached its final terminus at Trinidad in 1911 (this is the road shown on the Southwest Railroad History Map). Subsequent building was small lumber spurs not shown on the map.

The ER&E, C&N, the A&MR, and O&E remained isolated from the national rail network until 1914 when the AT&SF/SP-controlled San Francisco & Eureka Railroad was completed through the Eel River Canyon. In 1918, all these railroads were combined into the Northwestern Pacific Railroad. While the O&E line to Samoa remained active, the northern part of the O&E and the A&MR were cut back in stages and today track do not extend north of Arcata. In 1995, severe flooding of the Eel River washed out too much of the line to justify repairs and the NWP north of the Eel River, including the original ER&E, C&N, O&E, and A&MR, were again isolated and remain inactive.

Southward view of the Arcata rail yard. The C&N single track is split by a switch in the distance. The A&MR and northern part of the O&E were realigned, probably by the NWP, and replaced by the standard gauge track on the left (east). The track on the right was re-aligned to connect with the O&E (original H&MR) line to Samoa.



Closer view of the switch that once carried trains either southwest to Samoa (right/west) or north to Trinidad (left/east)



Another view of the same switch as previous, showing what's left of the rusting switch mechanism.



Northward view of the same switch as previous.