



In the late 1870's and early 1880's, the Southern Pacific focused its resources on completing its southern transcontinental route through southern Arizona and New Mexico to El Paso and beyond. The SP was in no rush to build east from Mojave, California, until 1880, when the St. Louis & San Francisco Railway came to an agreement with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad to jointly control the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad. The A&P built west from the AT&SF mainline at Isleta, New Mexico, to meet the SP at Needles, California. A&P construction reached Kingman, Arizona, in 1882, which prompted the SP to begin building its branch from Mojave to Needles, where it met the A&P on August 9, 1883. The AT&SF-controlled A&P leased the SP's new Needles Branch, and in 1885 the AT&SF-owned California Southern Railroad completed its line from San Diego over Cajon Pass to the AT&SF/A&P-leased SP Needles Branch at Barstow, giving the AT&SF access to the southern California coast. The AT&SF also entered California's Central Valley via Tehachapi Pass using trackage rights over the SP route.

An eastbound BNSF (AT&SF successor) plies the SP-Needles Branch, now a BNSF owned main line at Boron, California. The siding in the foreground is for a 3-mile-long spur to the U.S. Borax (now Rio Tinto) borax mine (spur not shown separately on the Southwest map).



Westward view of the former SP-Needles Branch, now a BNSF owned main line, plied by the same container train as the previous photo. The 3-mile-long spur to the U.S. Borax (now Rio Tinto) borax mine curves to the right (north).





Southeastward view of the U.S. Borax Spur at a road crossing; the train is on the BNSF main line.



In October 1913, Dr. J. K. Suckow was drilling a well for water 5 miles northwest of Boron when he discovered colemanite, a borax ore. After his discovery, mining claims, mostly placer, were located in the area. The Pacific Coast Borax Company acquired many of these claims, including the discovery well. In 1924, Suckow sunk another shaft a little south of his last one and found a 70-foot thick bed of colemanite at 210 feet, which in 1925 produced a few hundred tons of ore. Also in 1925, W. M. Dowsing and J. L. Hannan discovered a huge deposit 120 feet thick, which was sold to the Pacific Coast Borax Company in early 1926 and became known as the Baker Mine. The Baker Mine produced a substantial percentage of the borates produced in the district until litigation closed the mine in 1932. It was reopened in 1935 as the West Baker Mine and is now the world's largest borax producer; the mine is owned by Rio Tinto Minerals (formerly U.S. Borax) and is operated as an open-pit mine, the largest in California. This mine supplies nearly half of the world's supply of refined borates.

The yard in the foreground is the 3-mile-long spur from the BNSF main line. The spur has several branches into the mine complex. I could not find information on when the spur was built, but I would guess it was shortly after the 1935 opening of the West Baker Mine.





Southward view of the yard near the end of the U.S. Borax Spur.