



In 1858, asphalt deposits were noticed by a land survey party west of Bakersfield at the future site of the Sunset Oil Field. The Buena Vista Oil Company incorporated in 1864 and began refinery operations near modern McKittrick and produced over 4,000 gallons of kerosene by 1867. The field continued to grow, and in 1892-1893 the McKittrick Sunset Railroad was built from the SP mainline at Kern Junction in Bakersfield west to McKittrick to service the oil industry as well as agricultural traffic.

Oil reserves were discovered south of McKittrick, and in 1901 the Sunset Western Railroad built 30 miles southwestward from a junction with the MS at Gosford, to the new oil fields. The SW headed due southward from the MS at Gosford to a 90-degree bend westward at Connor, then southwest through this location at Pentland and another 2 miles to Hazelton, where the track ended in 1901. A portion of the line was built atop the existing grade of a former narrow-gauge line, the Buena Vista Reservoir Railroad (not shown separately on map). In 1904, the track was extended 2.5 miles northwest from Hazelton (end of track) to Maricopa. In 1909, the SW built a 17 mile branch north from Pentland (this location, 2 miles northeast of Hazelton) through Taft to Fellows, thereby completing the final extent of the line. The western half of the line was subsequently abandoned to a point just west of Levee Spur, and the eastern half is still in use by the San Joaquin Valley Railroad, a subsidiary of RailAmerica.

Southwestward view of the original SW grade at Pentland, California. The curve to the right is the beginning of the wye for the SW Taft Branch. The original SW alignment to Hazelton continued straight southwest. Note the higher ground where the grade curves; that is a loading facility seen in subsequent photos.



Southwestward view of the original SW grade at Pentland, California, approaching the curve to the right at the beginning of the wye for the Taft Branch. Note the higher ground where the grade curves -- the same loading facility as before -- and the old SW spike left behind in the ballast when the line was salvaged. Note also the flat area with ballast to the left; this is the original alignment toward Hazelton and is parallel to the approach to the Taft wye, which was likely a siding off of the original SW alignment.



Southwestward view of the original SW grade at Pentland, California, approaching the wye for the Taft Branch. The higher-ground loading facility is behind the post. The grade in the foreground, with splinters of old ties, is the original alignment toward Hazelton; the parallel approach to the Taft wye is to the right (northeast) on the other side of the row of brush. The hills in the distance are the Temblor Range, which bounds the Central Valley to the southwest.



Same location as previous, showing in oilfield-related pipeline and gauge across the SW grade. Note that the pipe goes underground on the right-hand side of the picture. This may have been to go under the still-active Taft wye after abandonment of the SW original grade in the foreground.



Southward view along the northeast branch of the Taft wye, in the foreground with a tie still present in the ballast. The SW line to Hazelton runs out of sight to the left of the elevated loading facility, in the upper right. Note the old paved road leading to the loading facility. Note also, on top of the old loading facility, an overpass with side rails; the next photo is up there.



Northward view on top of the old loading facility. The northwest corner of the Taft wye is behind the platform and the grade visible to the left (northwest) is the SW Taft Branch. The loading facility was certainly for truck loading, and it appears that, after abandonment of the Maricopa Branch (from Pentland through Hazelton to Maricopa) but before abandonment of the Taft Branch, the southwest branch of the Taft wye was used as a spur to this platform and trucks drove up onto this platform to load products from Maricopa onto trains through this hole. The product was probably clay, which is mined in Maricopa and used for kitty litter.



Northward view from on top of the old loading facility, where the Taft Branch completes its 90-degree turn from southwest going into Pentland to northwest coming out of Pentland. The trees and buildings in the distance are Maricopa.



Now we are south of the loading facility, visible in center distance of this northeastward view of the original SW grade to Hazelton. Note the rounded cobbles used in the ballast; this ballast is not from the fine-grained native soils in the area.





Southwestward view at the same location as previous, showing the original SW grade to Hazelton, built in 1901. Note the rounded cobbles used in the ballast; this ballast is not from the fine-grained native soils at this location and is different from the ballast used later to build the Taft Branch.



Now we are looking southward at the south end of Maricopa, 3 miles due west of Pentland and 2 miles northwest of Hazelton. The Maricopa Branch arrived here in 1904, but I could not find any definitive evidence of the alignment. Note the wood splinters (ties?) and round cobbles (ballast?), which likely are remnants of the Maricopa Branch.