



The Eel River & Eureka Railroad was organized in 1882 by a group of Eureka businessmen to transport timber from the logging areas around the Eel River to the port at Eureka. The initial 25 miles of the ER&E ran southward from the line's office and depot at Eureka through this location at Alton and was completed in 1884 to Burnell's Station, a town near today's Hydesville in the valley of the Van Duzen River (a tributary of the Eel). In the following year (1885), the Pacific Lumber Company built a branch line, the Humboldt Bay & Eel River Railroad, south from Alton (this location) along the Eel River about 4 miles to just beyond Pacific Lumber's company town of Scotia. Subsequent construction was limited to small, temporary extensions and spurs to access timber. By 1896, the ER&E was running passenger trains twice a day, but lumber was its main payload. In October 1902, all the property and rights of the ER&E were transferred to the San Francisco & Northwestern Railway (which operated trains but built no track). In 1914, the AT&SF- and SP-controlled San Francisco & Eureka Railroad was completed from Willets (at the junction with the California Western Railroad & Navigation Company [1911] line) northward through the Eel River Canyon to the HB&ER (1885) end-of-track just south of Scotia. The SF&NW absorbed the SF&E (1914) trackage and other trackage to create a continuous main line from San Francisco to Trinidad (north of Eureka). The part of the ER&E (1884) east of Alton (this location) became a branch line. In 1918, the SF&NW transferred these assets to 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. In 1980, freight was still running between San Francisco and Eureka (including this location). In 1983, the SP unsuccessfully tried to shut the line down and in 1984 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, which operated it for 3 years as the North Coast Railroad until 1995 when severe flooding of the Eel River washed out too much of the line to justify repairs. The line north of Willits, including this location at Alton Junction, has been cut off from the national railroad network and inactive since 1995.

Northwestward view of the inactive junction at Alton; note that some rails are missing and that the overgrown tracks are visible thanks only to some recent clearing. The ER&E (1884) alignment is the track in the distance and track that curves to the right (east) at a switch. The track that continues straight toward the viewer in the foreground is the alignment of the HB&ER (1885). After 1914, the ER&E (1884) north of this location was on the SF&NW/NWP/SP/ES/NC main line and the part of the ER&E (1884) east of this location became a branch line. Additionally, the track in this view is a siding for the junction switch seen here; the main line is hidden in the brush a few feet to left (west) of the siding). The main line follows the Eel River and the branch line follows the Van Duzen River, which empties into the Eel River 4,000 feet west of Alton.



Southeastward view of the inactive junction at Alton, same location as previous. Note, barely visible in the left distance, the pavement of California Highway 36.



Southward view at Alton, 200 feet south of previous location. The road that crosses the tracks is California Highway 36. The track on the right (west) is the HB&ER (1885)/SF&NW/NWP/SP/ES/NC main line (now emerged from under the brush), the track on the left is the same siding as before, and the branch that follows the ER&E (1884) east to Burnell's Station is out of sight to the left. Note the white buildings across the road.



Southward view of the white buildings at Alton. These are not historical structures; they were built by the current property owner/occupant to simulate a railroad depot. He is a local railfan who came out and talked to me while I was photographing Alton and is the only person I've met recently who still has a clothesline! Note the HB&ER (1885)/SF&NW/NWP/SP/ES/NC main line in the far right of the photo, the parallel siding just to the left of the main line (and in the foreground), the short decorative track laid just to the left of the clothesline, and railroad signals in front of the smaller of the two white buildings.



Closer view of the short decorative track laid near the simulated depot and the clothesline. Note the HB&ER (1885)/SF&NW/NWP/SP/ES/NC main line and siding in the left distance.



Southward view at the south end of Alton, where the tracks are not actively cleared and thus disappear beneath overgrowth.



Now we've moved almost a mile east of Alton and are looking eastward at the ER&E (1884) alignment; this is the part of the ER&E (1884) that became a branch of the SF&NW/NWP/SP/ES/NC main line after the 1914 completion of the line to San Francisco. This line was built on the flood plain of the Van Duzen River, a tributary of the Eel River.



Southward view at Carlotta, California, where an overgrown bridge carries the ER&E (1884) over Yager Creek. This location is 4 miles east of Alton and 2 miles east of the reported end-of-track at Burnell's Station/Hydesville (Hydesville is the town that developed along California Highway 36 next to Burnell's Station). The only literature I could find about the line east of Burnell's Station is that, following completion of the line to Burnell's Station in 1884, subsequent construction was limited to small extensions and spurs, and that topo maps show NWP tracks extending 7 miles east of Burnell's Station, including this location at Carlotta.





Eastward view of a presumed railroad grade near Van Duzen County Park; the location is 1 mile east of the NWP tracks shown on topo maps, 6 miles east of Carlotta (previous location), 8 miles east of Burnell's Station, and 10 miles east of Alton. This could be an old road (old Highway 36) or a temporary railroad grade for logging or both.