



In the late 1870's and first years of the 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, through this location near Prewitt, New Mexico, and across Arizona to meet the SP at Needles, California, in 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, completing a transcontinental route and giving the AT&SF access to the southern California coast.

Northward view of the A&P (1883), now BNSF, at a location 3 miles west of Prewitt, New Mexico. This location is 15 miles east of the A&P (1883) crossing of the continental divide. Although the elevation of the crossing is 7,275 feet, it is relatively flat due to its location on the flat-lying strata of the Colorado Plateau (seen here in the flat valley and the flat-lying strata in the distant cliffs). Note that, in addition to the obvious track in the foreground, there is a parallel track in the middle distance that connects to a wye in the upper left of the photo. The parallel track in the middle distance is the original alignment of the A&P (1883) and the obvious track in the foreground is a second track on a shallower gradient than the original track to make for an easier crossing of the continental divide (this closer track was built sometime between 1886 and 1954, as ascertained from available topo maps, and was probably built around 1920, when other parts of the AT&SF mainline were double tracked). The wye in the upper left of the photo is the starting point of the Escalante Western Railroad, which leads to the Escalante Power Plant, whose smokestack is visible in the upper right (see below).



Closer look at the same view as previous, with the circa 1920 second track of the A&P (1883)/AT&SF mainline in the foreground, the original alignment of the A&P (1883) in the middle ground, and the wye for the Escalante Western Railroad in the distance. The wye was constructed in 1980 and leads 2.6 miles north to the coal-fired Escalante Power Plant and its loop track. In 1983, in order to develop a nearby source of coal for the power plant, a AT&SF subsidiary commenced construction of the Baca Coal Spur at a location on the A&P (1883)/AT&SF mainline 3 miles east (to the right) of this location at Prewitt. In 1984, the line was completed 42 miles to the Lee Ranch Coal Mine. The mine began coal production immediately; coal from the mine was hauled 42 miles south to the A&P (1883)/AT&SF mainline, which trains followed west for three miles to the wye seen here, then followed the 2.6 mile spur to the Escalante Power Plant. After unloading coal at the power plant, empty trains turned around using the loop at the power plant and followed the same route back to the Lee Ranch Coal Mine. By 1985, both the Baca Coal Spur and the 2.6-mile spur to the power plant were operated by the Escalante Western Railroad, which built a 3.5 mile connecting track that ran east from the power plant to a point on the Baca Coal Spur, thus shortening the route from the power plant to the Lee Ranch Coal Mine and circumventing the A&P (1883)/AT&SF mainline. Possibly also in 1985, or sometime soon thereafter, a branch line was built, presumably by the EW, from a point on the former Baca Coal Spur northward 7 miles the continental divide to another coal mine, so now two coal mines feed the Escalante Power Plant. All these branches and spurs are indicated as the Escalante Western (c1985) on the Southwest Railroad History Map.



Slightly different northward view of, closest to farthest, the circa 1920 second track of the A&P (1883)/AT&SF mainline with a small overpass on the left, the original alignment of the A&P (1883) with a unit coal train, and the wye for the EW (c1985), which is being bypassed by this train. The smokestack for the Escalante Power Plant is visible in the upper right, which receives coal from the other direction (via the connecting track built in 1985 or slightly later).