



In 1851, gold was discovered along the Kern River in the southern Sierra Nevada, and in 1865 oil was discovered in the southern San Joaquin Valley. The settlement of Kern Island, later Bakersfield, was a tule-covered marshland when pioneers built log cabins there in 1860. By 1870, with a population of 600, what is now Bakersfield was becoming the principal town in Kern County. In 1874, construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad building south from Sacramento reached the southern San Joaquin Valley. Bakersfield was the logical stop for the railroad because it was at the western end of the grade up to Tehachapi Pass, the most difficult obstacle on the SP's entire mainline from Sacramento/San Francisco to Los Angeles (1876) and then to El Paso, Texas (1881).

Bakersfield has some railroad history to review, so we'll explore the town chronologically, starting with this eastward view of the SP mainline 3 miles east of downtown Bakersfield. The SP reached this point in 1874 and took two years to cross Tehachapi Pass. (The branch to the right is the SP Arvin Branch, discussed below). The hills in the distant haze are the southern Sierra Nevada, aka the Tehachapi Mountains. This BNSF container train is operating on SP (now UP) tracks under trackage rights granted in the 1890's so the AT&SF could connect to its San Francisco & San Joaquin Valley Railroad at a junction 3 miles west of here (see below).



The 1898 commencement exercises at Kern County High School were canceled because all three men of the senior class had joined the National Guard to serve in the Spanish-American War. The war dampened the otherwise euphoric mood of the people of Bakersfield caused by the arrival of the much anticipated San Francisco & San Joaquin Valley Railroad, which would provide long-needed competition for the SP in California's Central Valley. The second railroad to operate in Kern County was being constructed from Stockton south to Bakersfield to connect with the SP route over Tehachapi Pass and points east. I am not sure why the SP allowed the AT&SF, which was the only competition for the SP in the Central Valley and throughout California, to use its tracks.

This westward view of the SF&SJV (now BNSF) is about 1,000 feet shy of Kern Junction in downtown Bakersfield, where the SF&SJV joined the SP line in 1898. Note the BNSF (AT&SF/SF&SJV successor) rolling stock.



This eastward view of the SF&SJV (now BNSF) line is about 500 feet shy of its junction with SP (now UP), visible in the distance (some stored cars). The hills in the distant haze are the southern Sierra Nevada.



Westward view of the SF&SJV (now BNSF) line on the left at its junction with SP (now UP) line on the right. Note that the SF&SJV has two tracks at Kern Junction.

The SF&SJV was known as the "Valley Road" and also as the "People's Railroad" because it had many small investors and because it broke the SP's monopoly over valley industry and agriculture. When the SF&SJV arrived at this point on May 27, 1898, the people of Bakersfield were ready to celebrate. The Daily Californian ran the headline "Kern County Welcomes the Valley Road" and reported "when Bakersfield awoke this morning it was to find every street in the town gaily decorated with streamers, flags and bunting and every business house tastily arrayed in gala attire." Delegations from San Francisco, Los Angeles, Fresno, and Merced watched a parade with local sports team members, Civil War veterans, business people, and the Bakersfield Fire Department. The Chinese community brought floats and parade dragons down from San Francisco at great expense and effort to the delight of the parade audience. The celebration included free passage on the new Valley Road. A planning committee asked that the railroad "fare be set at a figure low enough to be attractive and high enough to keep the hoboes from crowding the coaches." The SP immediately lowered its passenger fare to match the fare offered by the SF&SJV. The San Francisco Call headlined their newspaper "Bakersfield freed from tyranny."



Eastward view of the SP (left)-SF&SJV (right) junction, same location as above. The curved track, closest to the viewer on the left, is the second SF&SJV track at Kern Junction.



Eastward view of Kern Junction. Note another junction just beyond the SF&SJV; we'll take a closer look at this junction below.



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 (shown here) west to McKittrick. The MS branch line was built 18 years after the SP mainline and 5 years before the SF&SJV Valley line connected to the SP at the same location (immediate foreground).



Closer view of the MS line (right) and the SP (now UP) Bakersfield yard with stored oil tank cars.





Same location as above.



Westward view of the MS line (left) and the SP (now UP) Bakersfield yard with stored oil tank cars. Note the older bolted track of the MS.



Northward view of the MS line and sidings; the wye with the SP (now UP) is in the distance.



Northward view of the MS line and the wye with the SP (now UP) in the distance.



Another view of the MS (1893) at its wye with the SP (now UP).



Southward view of an abandoned siding on the MS line, just south of the wye with the SP (now UP).



Now we are 3 miles east of Kern Junction to view the most recent addition to Bakersfield railroad history. The on-coming train is heading west on the SP (now UP) mainline, which is used also by BNSF (formerly AT&SF). The branch line to the right (south) is the SP Arvin Branch, built in 1923 to service agricultural and petroleum areas southeast of Bakersfield.



Northwest view of the 1923 SP Arvin Branch at its junction with the SP mainline.





Southeast view of the 1923 SP Arvin Branch, just south of the SP mainline (same location as previous), where the Arvin Branch turns due south. Tracks are still present all the way to Arvin (as of 2016).