

Bartlett's News Briefs



NOT JUST ANYBODY

community-sponsored stories

by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer

The Pacifica Historical Society invites Pacificans to climb aboard restoration support for the RR car that built this town



The Ocean Shore Railroad, coastside, in 1910. (Bruno Crenci photo.)

Long ago, Ocean Shore RR Car 1409 carried travelers alongside sand and cliffs, farms and rural homes. Some stopped to build.

When 1907-born Bob Siebert was a kid, he and his brother headed from their home on 32nd Avenue in San Francisco, to the train depot at 12th and Mission. "That was quite an experience to go down the coast on the Ocean Shore Railroad and see the land disappear on the seaward side, and the cliffs keep us company all the way down," Bob told videographer Steve Brown in 1985. Bob liked what he saw from the passenger car so much as a kid, that he moved to Sharp Park in 1941. He went on to become a beloved and longtime Pacifica elementary school teacher.

Born in 1909, Ray Kewnig also traveled the Ocean Shore RR in his youth and he too found inspiration looking through the windows of this novelty train. As an adult, he settled permanently in Pacifica. A glazier and a carpenter, Ray built three houses in Pacifica, all on Paloma.

When A. L. Schindler—general manager of the Northern Electric Railroad—rode the Ocean Shore line to Pacifica's Pedro Valley, he was dazzled by the new railroad. "The Ocean Shore has a magnificent future," he told a *San Francisco Call* reporter. "The company's greatest difficulty will be to handle the large passenger traffic on Sundays and holidays." He also noted that, "In a span of three weeks, \$225,000 worth of lots were purchased in Pedro Terrace. The development of the West Coast of the Peninsula has just begun."

Were all these comments sparked by a ride in Passenger Car 1409? Undoubtedly, two of them were, and those 1409 riders would be Bob Siebert and Ray Kewnig. In A. L. Schindler's case, his story ran on March 16, 1908, and Car 1409 wasn't built until 1909. But the excitement the Ocean Shore line generated was palpable in his interview. "More than 3,500 passengers took advantage of the pleasant day yesterday (Sunday) to visit the beach resorts on the new railroad."

Despite it being called, "A beauty to rival the famous Italian railway along the Riviera from Nice to Genoa," (Andrea Sbarboro, founder, Italian-Swiss Colony Wine Company), the dream railroad came to an end in 1920. But oh, the hopes were high in September of 1905, when the Ocean Shore Railway began construction on the double track electric line, set to run the (about) 83 miles between 12th and Mission in San Francisco to Santa Cruz.

The tracks were built to hug the shoreline, a sure bet to entice weekend riders. That decision, however, nearly ended the railway altogether when the Great San Francisco Earthquake of April 18, 1906, created a devastating coastal rockslide which plummeted 4,000 feet of railroad track and construction equipment into the Pacific. That was the railway's biggest disaster, but not its first. On April 13, 1906, W. L. Holman, founder of the W. L. Holman Car Company in San Francisco, suffered a fire at his Fremont Street shop which obliterated \$30,000 worth of railroad equipment – including what was meant to be the railroad's first car.

Financially walloped but not defeated, construction resumed on the Ocean Shore Railway in September of 1907. But because of money losses, some of the original vision had to be changed. Now it was a single-track steam line rather than a two-track electric railway, and its final stop would be 26 miles short of Santa Cruz. In October of 1907, passenger service from San Francisco to Tobin station (in Pacifica) resumed. By late 1908, the train made its full coastal run south to Tunitas Glen.

OSRR Car 1409 was built in 1909 by W. L. Holman. She had brass fixtures and mahogany trim, and birds-eye maple interior finishing. Her car's unique identification, 1409, was applied in gold leaf over the interior door. She was one of only five passenger cars of this type built, and she was the last car purchased by the Ocean Shore Railroad. As of now, she is the only known surviving passenger car of the OSRR.

Beautifully crafted, Car 1409 met the promise of her design and gave her passengers the ride of their lives. The full-course ride began in San Francisco, headed on to Daly City (Thornton, Mussel Rock), then into today's Pacifica: Edgemar, Salada, Brighton, Vallemar, Rockaway and San Pedro-Terrace by the Sea (the Tobin station). Following the Tobin station, passengers dropped into a 354-foot tunnel through San Pedro Mountain. When the car resurfaced, it was 700 feet above the ocean. Continuing along, it wound its way down through Montara, Moss Beach, North Granada, South Granada, Half Moon Bay and Purisima, eventually arriving at Tunitas. Twenty cents was the round-trip fare between San Francisco and Pacifica, and the ride was anywhere from 30 minutes to 57 minutes, depending on fog or track problems.

For Passenger Car 1409 and the entire Ocean Shore Railway, trouble constantly knocked at its door. The Ocean Shore Railway went bankrupt in 1909, the final result of the Great Earthquake. It was reincorporated as the Ocean Shore Railroad in October of 1911. In early 1916, a landslide at the coastal promontory between Pacifica and Montara, our famous Devil's Slide, closed the line for over two months and at a cost of \$300,000 in repairs. There were also poor business decisions, union strikes, and roadblocks thrown in by competing railroad Southern Pacific. The relatively new pick-up truck became

the choice of local farmers, over train cars, for product transport to market – another blow to the Railway's pockets. Then there was the automobile. That convenient new luxury slowly closed the door on coastal train travel, and in 1920, with the loss of thousands of dollars annually, the Ocean Shore Railroad came to a halt. Its track was taken up and eventually sold to McCloud River Railroad in Siskiyou County, CA, and its right of way was turned into Highway 1. People told the *San Francisco Chronicle* after all was said and done that they were sorry to see it go. As to Car 1409, she wasn't sold. She simply vanished.

In 2004, in response to a property owner's phone call, railcar restoration expert Jeff Millerick and railroad historian John Schmale headed out to a backyard in Sebastopol. There, near an old railroad right of way, stood a train-car shaped ruin that was being used as a tool shed. It was submerged a foot into the ground, lodged between two oak trees and covered in 84 years of vegetation. A little cleaning above the door frame revealed a "gold leaf" number, 1409. How she got there is a story undoubtedly only told precisely by ghosts. But John Schmale got on the phone with the then president of the Pacifica Historical Society, longtime Pacifican Kathleen Manning, and Kathleen got the wheels turning.

Kathleen, as it turns out, was a born-savior of that passenger car. Her father worked for the Michigan railroad, Pere Marquette, and was Chief Engineer of Bridges and Structures. Her father's father was chief engineer of the railroad. Earlier on he had supervised the building of trains running through Oklahoma. Her Uncle Fred was chief engineer of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. Her Great Uncle Frank worked as an accountant for the Grand Trunk Western Railroad.

Things changed immediately for Car 1409 following Kathleen's involvement. Months were spent stabilizing her roof and walls, and in 2005, she made her way on the back of a flatbed truck across the Golden Gate Bridge and into her first Pacifica location, a donated space at Shamrock Ranch. There, work began on her undercarriage reconstruction. This included replacing rusted I-beam ends and replacing the majority of the wood beams bolted to the I-beams to form the base for the coachwork. Then there was the framing work which needed all kiln-dried, custom-melded white oak. By 2013, the PHS had raised and spent \$45,000 on this project, which included moving it to a new worksite at Calera Creek. Car 1409 spent some time on standby while the PHS finished all the restoration work and fundraising needed to re-open Pacifica's 1910-built Little Brown Church as the Pacifica Coastsides Museum in August of 2015. By 2018, \$100,000 had been raised for 1409, which after a temporary relocation behind Ash's Vallemar Station Restaurant, now sits in Sharp Park in the parking lot across the street from the Little Brown Church.

More money has come in and the old passenger car's trucks – the assemblies under each end of the car that hold the wheelsets that provide support, mobility, and guidance for the car – have been purchased and are being restored. More money is needed but Car 1409 is far from the sad, skeletal shell she was in 2004. Though she is currently hidden under a protective covering while restoration remains ongoing, she is now gleaming and sturdy and home in Pacifica, made possible because of Pacificans.

Pacifican Jay Crawford didn't know anything about Car 1409 until his late wife, Denise, became involved with the Pacifica Historical Society a few years back. Jay and Denise were both raised in Pacifica and both are graduates of Terra Nova High School – Jay in 1971 and Denise in 1972. They married after high school, had careers – Jay first in law enforcement, then after retirement from that field, he became a high school teacher; Denise's career was in information technology.

"When Denise retired and joined the Historical Society, she shared what she learned and I became interested," Jay said recently. Now a PHS board member, Jay went on to discuss some of Pacifica's history that he has since learned and is inspired by.

"The story of the Coastsides was one of farms and ranches but little in the way of housing. In addition, the farms and ranches had problems getting their products to market in San Francisco. The answer came in the form of the Ocean Shore Railroad. It only lasted a couple of decades but it made the difference.

Without it, this area would still be horses, cattle and produce with shipping problems. The story of 1409 and the challenges overcome by the railroad is colorful and fun. Restoring Car 1409 allows people to connect to our local history and put it in perspective."

There is so much more to learn about the train. "Ocean Shore Railroad (Images of Rail)" written by Chris Hunter, former Editor and Publisher of the *Pacifica Tribune*, is an excellent source. As is the Ocean Shore Railroad compendium, "Never a Dull Mile" written by Gordon van Zuiden, Capitola Historical Museum board member. Of course the Pacifica Historical Society, www.pacificahistory.org, is a phenomenal train resource, as is the PHS additional website, www.oceanshorerrailroad.org. Also be sure to investigate John Schmale OSRR publications, as well as the Ocean Shore Railroad Car #1409 Restoration Project Group on Facebook.

Railroads changed how people across the nation, settled into new areas to conduct business and live their lives – and we've got our very own train story right here in Pacifica. If you can, make a tax-deductible donation to this cause through the Pacifica Historical Society's website. Long after we're gone, this beautifully-restored Car 1409, fully unveiled and standing adjacent to the Pacifica Coastside Museum, will invite future explorers to travel our city and our history through the passenger car that gave us Pacifica.

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By Jean Bartlett (December 3, 2025)

Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by Pacifican Jay Crawford. It is dedicated to Car 1409 worker bee extraordinaire, the late Shirlee Gibbs.