

# The Historian

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## Salvaging the Santa Fe Train Remains



June 1917, Locomotive 721, sitting on temporary tracks, being pulled out of Santa Margarita Canyon a year after the big flood. *Fallbrook Historical Society photo*

More than a year after the disastrous floods of January 1916 had washed out the railroad in the Santa Margarita River Canyon, Santa Fe began laying tracks for a new rail line on higher ground across the old Rancho Santa Margarita (today's Camp Pendelton) to Fallbrook. Santa Fe put out a Request for Proposals on a contract to salvage their stranded railroad equipment still down in the canyon. Santa Fe placed considerable value on what had been left behind after the flood.

The contract specified that the salvager was to deliver the engine, cars, turntable and all available scrap to a connection with the new line in Fallbrook within 90 days from the time of the awarding of the contract.

Two bids were received. One bid was for \$40,000 from a responsible and reliable firm in Los Angeles.

The second proposal was a low bid of only \$6,000 from a little-known house-mover in Pasadena. Sante Fe division superintendent J.R. Hitchcock had his doubts about the house-mover's ability to do the job, but the large difference in the amount of the bids and the potential savings put him on the spot. After thinking it over a while, the Superintendent gave the contract to the house-movers, W.O. Basore & Co, "The Boys" as Hitchcock called them.



January 1916, Fallbrook Station in Santa Margarita Canyon immediately after the big flood. Several of the stranded train cars can be seen here. *Fallbrook Historical Society photo*

The equipment to be lifted out of the canyon consisted of an 80-ton 2-8-0 locomotive No. 721, a 36-ton turntable, four refrigerator cars, one passenger coach, one baggage-passenger combination car, one tank car, one box car and an assortment of scrap material. Some of the cars were on their sides along the riverbank. Total weight of the equipment, including loads, was about 400 tons. The distance to be moved to a connection with the new line in the town was 8400 feet with a vertical rise of 463 feet up a maximum grade of 14 percent with a 50-degree maximum of curvature.

The salvage work was performed by five men and four horses, using two capstans and about 3,000 feet of one-half inch cable, several one-inch chains and plenty of cussing. The capstans had 10-inch spools with a sweep of 108 inches and were each operated by two horses. At several places along the route the clearance was so close that it was necessary to dig out the hillside to allow room to operate the capstans.

Everything in the canyon that was salvageable was brought out. All available scrap was loaded into the box car and refrigerator cars, the turntable loaded on a flat car and, to reduce weight, the tender was cut away from the engine, the engine being the last piece of the equipment to be brought out.

A short distance from the starting point in the bottom of the canyon, the equipment was switched over to a county wagon road (today's DeLuz Road.), but as they neared the top of the hill the movers were forced to leave the county road and build their own right of way. Fifty-pound rails spiked to ties were laid ahead of the equipment and torn up behind it and re-laid ahead as the work progressed. Two capstans, four horses, and five men used six single-sheaf blocks to pull the 80-ton locomotive up the 14 percent grade. On higher grades, two cars were moved by the same method at an average speed of six feet per minute. No trouble developed, and on grades under 10 percent, two horses easily moved loads up to 50 tons.



**MEDAL OF  
HONOR DAY**

**CEREMONY**

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25TH**  
**11:00 AM**

PLEASE JOIN THE SGT. WM. PITTENGER CAMP 21  
SONS OF UNION VETERANS OF THE CIVIL WAR  
IN HONORING ALL THOSE WHO HAVE RECEIVED  
OUR NATION'S HIGHEST HONOR

★ ★ ★

FALLBROOK ODDFELLOWS PIONEER CEMETERY  
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The engine was stripped to a 15-foot rigid wheelbase and was pulled around 50-degree curves without derailling. A maximum super-elevation of four inches was used on curves, and the inner rails were kept well-greased with crude oil. Experience showed that the greasing of the inner rail on curves was necessary to keep the engine on the track, and that a four-inch super-elevation was the maximum that could be used without overturning the rails.

Work began March 14, 1917, and all of the equipment was cut in on the new line in the center of Fallbrook on Sunday, June 10, 1917, well within the contract time. Superintendent Hitchcock was highly pleased. "The Boys" got their \$6,000 and were rich.



**May or June 1917**, Main Ave & Fig Street intersection where the new Sante Fe RR track will cross Main. The man is pointing southwest, the direction the new track is coming from. The stranded equipment was brought up out of the canyon by twos or threes, depending on its weight. The cars were joined together here. When the new track arrived, the whole recovered line was hauled off to Sante Fe shops for refurbishment. *Fallbrook Historical Society photo*



**June 1917 Mission Accomplished!** The inoperative locomotive, sitting on temporary tracks in Fallbrook on Main Ave. at about Hawthorne St. is waiting to connect to the new Sante Fe rail line. The locomotive (facing north), the last car to be pulled out of the canyon, is at the rear of the recovered train. Notice the bicycle lying on the ground, and the boy sitting with a man atop the engine. *Fallbrook Historical Society photo*

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**Tom Frew**

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We are celebrating the Historical Society's  
**50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2026**



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