



John Muir and the Alhambra Valley Trestle

Today, the Alhambra Valley Trestle originally constructed in 1899 and located next to State Highway 4 in Martinez, California is used by the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad. Considering the close proximity between the Trestle and the John Muir National NHS which includes the home where Muir lived the last 24 years of his life, it begs the question if there is any connection between the two. In fact, there is an historical connection.

In 1897, John Muir owned approximately 2,600 acres of land in the Martinez area. The San Francisco and San Joaquin Railway Company wanted the right of way through part of Muir's property located near his house in order to construct their railway line. On October 29, 1897 an indenture between John Muir and his wife Louie and the San Francisco and San Joaquin Railway Company was signed by all parties concerned. The indenture states that John and Louie Muir will receive the sum of ten dollars U.S. gold coin for the right of way through several specific areas of Muir's property. The land upon which the trestle was built is specified in the indenture.

While ten Dollars seems like very little compensation for the right of way through so much land, the Muir's understood that having such close access to a railroad would greatly enhance their ability to ship fruit to more distant locations, thus raising profitability. And in fact, only three years after signing over rights-of-way, John Muir and family were reaping the rewards of this agreement.

In October, 1890 Muir wrote that his oldest daughter Wanda: "comes home [from school] every Friday or Saturday by the new railway that crosses the vineyards near the house." And it also appears that because of his arrangement with the railroad, Muir "received... a life pass on all lines of the Santa Fe" and that the Muir Station Depot, only yards east of the trestle and in service as of May 1, 1900, was so named in his honor.

In 1906, Muir's youngest daughter, Helen had developed an enthusiasm for railway mechanics. John Muir bought her technical books and magazines and would call Helen "my locomotive daughter". With Santa Fe trains running over the Alhambra Valley Trestle, then entering a tunnel on the west side of the ranch, Helen could apply her railroad knowledge and John and Helen would often take rides in the cabs of the trains. Helen eventually learned how to operate the engine and at least one time made the entire run from Stockton to Muir Station. The trainmen and Helen became good friends and when the trains would pass by the Muir house, they would blow the whistle to call Helen out.

During the cherry and grape seasons, John and Helen would take big baskets of fruit to the trainmen as they passed by. One day they hung a huge basket of ripe cherries over the entrance to the tunnel by the trestle within reach of the cab window. When the train was approaching, John and Helen stood where the engineer and fireman could see them and pointed to the tunnel. Just as the engine reached the tunnel, the engineer or fireman reached out and was able to grab the basket and pull it through the window.