

Field Notes from the Santa Cruz Mountains: Mapping Ghost Towns

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THERE HAS NEVER BEEN AN EASY WAY over the steep and rugged terrain of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Even today, far too many zippy Silicon Valley commuters meet their demise as they weave around sluggish trucks on the treacherous Highway 17. The highway rapidly changed the cultural landscape. It was not the only way “over the hill.” Its completion in 1940 led to a widespread abandonment of towns, roads, and railroads in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Towns that were once busy stagecoach or railroad stops now lie deep in watery graves below human-made reservoirs or have been incinerated by wildfire, never rebuilt. Rails and ties from the short-lived South Pacific Coast Railroad (1880–1940) have all been removed. Only faint dirt roads that once were railroad grades, along with the haunting portals of the perilous mile-long railroad tunnels, remain to tell the story.

For thousands of years, traveling along the Los Gatos Creek drainage was the way to the other side of the mountain. Even with advances in transportation modes—from the first Americans’ foot trails to horseback-traveled mission roads to thundering railroads—all routes took the path of least resistance along the creek and up through the mountains. The journey was never easy, its steep slopes difficult to maneuver and, until the mid-1800s, its hills crawling with grizzlies. The advent of the automobile spelled the end of the line for railroad and the little settlements that had formed alongside it. The railroad was decommissioned in 1940, the year Highway 17 was completed.

I became interested in these forgotten places while working as an archaeologist on a “shaded fuel break” project along Highway 17 last year. The project, a joint effort between CalFire, CalTrans, and the Santa Clara FireSafe Council, created a safer passage for the 60,000-plus daily commuters and mountain residents in the event of a wildfire by removing excess vegetation adjacent to the highway. As an archaeologist, I found it curious that, with little exception, all the archaeological sites and features I came across while surveying did not date to before the 1920s. Evidence of the automobile era, however, was prevalent in my survey transects. Old, crashed cars littered the base of the ravine, accounting for a great deal of the “artifacts” I recorded (Figure 1). The only archaeological sites more common than mangled automobiles were historic dumping episodes



Figure 1.—Highway 17 artifact (photo by author).

of household refuse dating from the 1920s into the mid-1960s, full of church-key opened and pull-tab cans, representing a time predating municipal trash removal.

Missing from the archaeological record in this area, however, was any representation of life before cars. Traces of prehistoric presence were extremely scant for such a large area. Strangely absent were the unmistakable vestiges of the Gold Rush at the turn of the nineteenth century, namely hole-in-top cans with their distinctive solder-dots and fragments of amethyst-colored manganese-infused glass, ubiquitous in other parts of California. Surely people got themselves over the mountain before automobiles. Just not here.

Once I started talking to the local mountain folk, however, the legends of submerged stagecoach towns and haunted abandoned train tunnels came alive to my imagination. The stories I heard triggered my curiosity, on which I drew when a graduate-level GIS course at Humboldt State University provided the opportunity to put these lost places back on a map. The goal of my project was to digitize the abandoned rail line and ghost towns, discerning where they rested in relation to the contemporary landscape. For this project, I needed to find a historic map that was accurate enough to digitize and contained the features I sought. The 1919 USGS topographic quadrangle fit the bill, clearly portraying the railroad

alignment, stagecoach roads, and the structures of the ghost towns. Maps predating the 1919 topo quadrangle were difficult to read and proved less accurate. More recent maps were stripped of the features I sought. My digitization efforts focused on the segment of the South Pacific Coast Railroad that spanned from the south end of Los Gatos to the small hamlet of Glenwood. The rail line continued west of Glenwood to Felton, but, unfortunately, fell off the edge of the map (Figure 2).

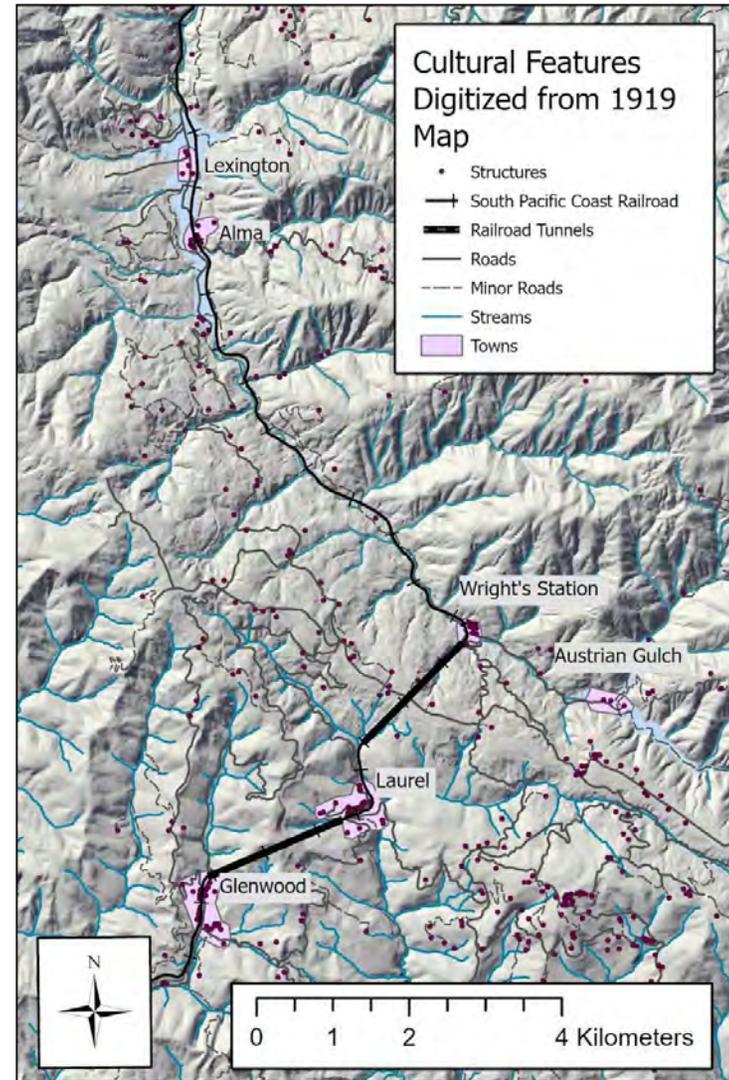


Figure 2.—Digitized 1919 Map (map by author).

Lexington and Alma

The towns of Lexington and Alma, located deep below the Lexington Reservoir (Figures 3–6), were the first stops. Once a stagecoach stop, Lexington found itself on the wrong side of the creek from the railroad, which resulted in most of its population moving a mile south to Alma. In 1988, the reservoir was drained. An aerial photograph from that year, while revealing the paths of the former roads and rail lines, offered scant evidence of the two towns (Figure 7). The 1919 map, however, brought to life all the structures and roads before being drowned by the reservoir.



Figure 3.—Postcard of Alma from 1915 (Los Gatos Historic Research Collection).

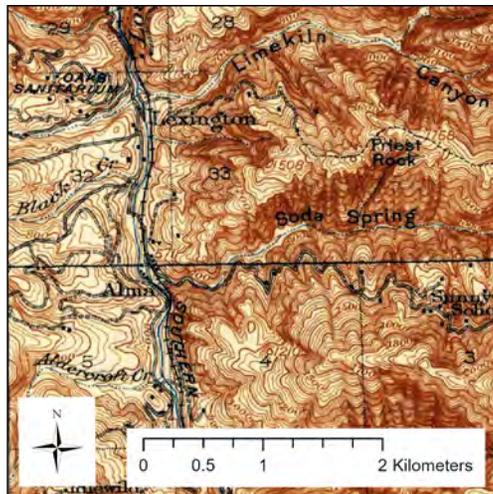


Figure 4.—Lexington and Alma (1919 Los Gatos Topographic Quadrangle).

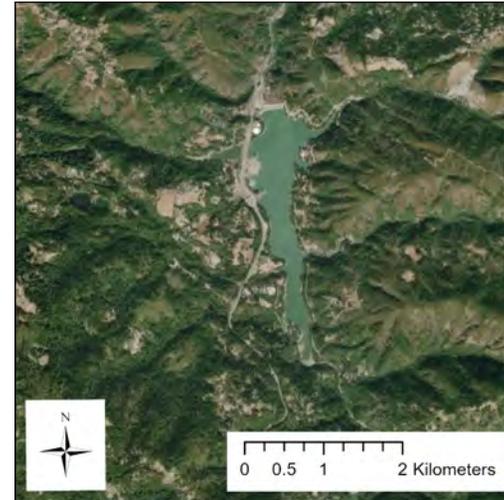


Figure 5.—Same area today, inundated by the Lexington Reservoir (Esri basemaps).

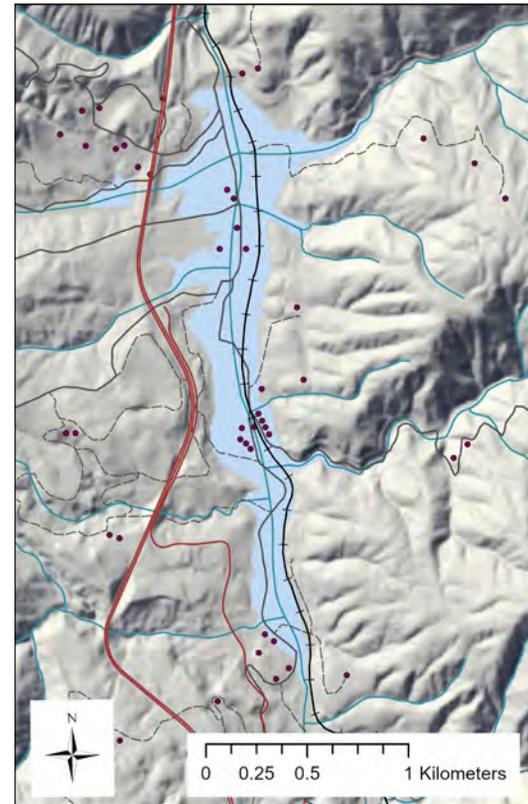


Figure 6.—Lexington and Alma, digitized. Note: modern highways in red (map by author).



Figure 7.—1988 Aerial Photograph of Drained Lexington Reservoir (Los Gatos Local History Research Collection).

Tunnel Towns (Wright's Station, Laurel, and Glenwood) and Austrian Gulch

Laying the railroad along Los Gatos Creek in the late 1870s was easy enough, as the line could parallel existing stagecoach stops. But the slopes of the Santa Cruz Mountains were far too steep for the railroad to reach the summit. The ambitious solution was to drill a pair of giant tunnels, each about a mile long, through the mountains. At the tunnel portals, small boomtowns such as Wright's Station, Laurel, and Glenwood emerged, initially serving as labor camps and later becoming railroad stops. Wright's became a hub of commerce where ambitious mountain settlers traded lumber and crops. Picnickers from as far away as San Francisco would come to enjoy the pleasant Sunset Park somewhere near Austrian Gulch (Figures 8–9).

Wright's tunnel met tragedy when the miners struck a vein of natural gas. The tunnel slowly filled with gas. Once ignited, a ball of fire shot through the tunnel with great force, incinerating more than thirty Chinese laborers. The survivors refused to continue working. Local legends claim that the tunnel remains haunted by the souls of the dead.

The more I read about these forgotten places, the stronger my curiosity grew. I conducted a field visit to hunt down as many ghost towns and tunnel portals as I could. I wanted to assess the current conditions and

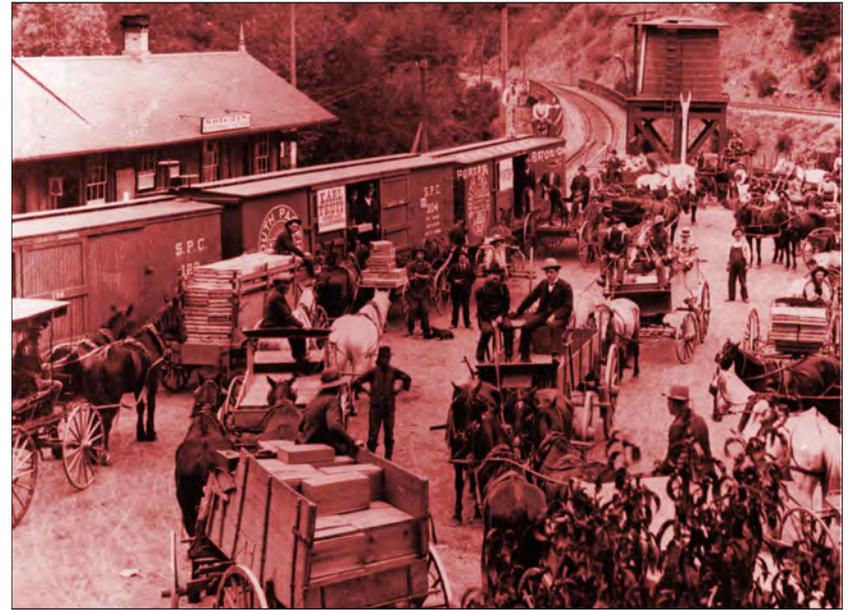


Figure 8.—Wright's Station, 1893 (Los Gatos Local History Research Collection).

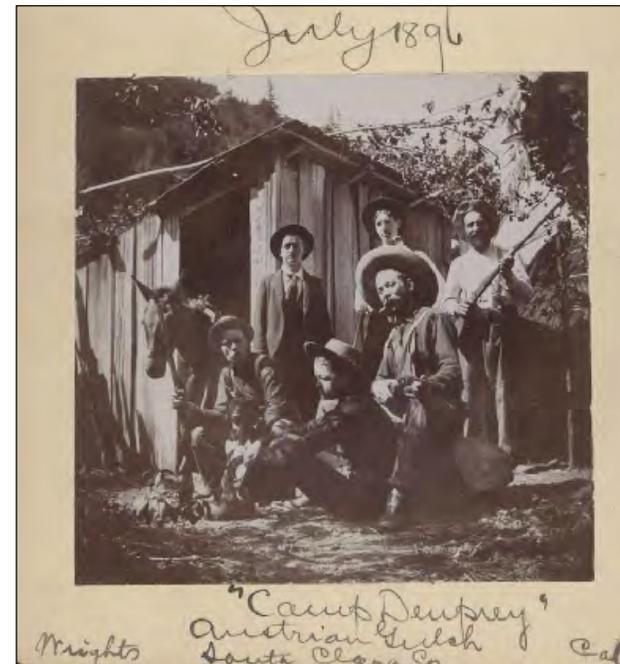


Figure 9.—Life in Austrian Gulch, 1896 (Los Gatos Historic Research Collection).

ground-truth the georeferenced 1919 topographic map, which I had loaded onto a tablet. The old map guided me to the locations of the historic features. Wright's Station, once a lively railroad stop, was truly a ghost of a town. Almost nothing remained of the town except for the decrepit, spooky tunnel, slowly being reclaimed by nature through erosion, and some bridge footings that no longer held a bridge (Figures 10–11). In better shape were Laurel and Glenwood, retaining some residences that appear to date from the railroad era. But the tunnel portals were the only reminders of the railroad.



Figure 10.—The Tunnel at Wright's Station (photo by author).

By way of finalizing my class project, I applied digitization efforts to create an area of archaeological sensitivity for the railroad and its associated ghost town, simply a buffer of 100 meters around the features I had digitized.



Figure 11.—Bridge Footings at Wright's Station (photo by author).

Added to the local clearinghouse of archaeological information, this shapefile can alert future archaeologists to be aware of the subtle hints of cultural landscape that has been largely erased.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank her field assistant Lani Brewer, who helped track down, photograph, and ground-truth historic features. The author also extends much appreciation to the people at the Los Gatos Local History Collection for the historic photographs and to Dr. James Graham, geospatial faculty at Humboldt State University, who offered encouragement to share her research with the broader community of California geographers.



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