

Portion of 1902 USGS topographic map showing the Southern Pacific Whittier Branch from Stuebaker to Whittier.

## SP's Whittier Branch

By John Nestegard

Located about 12 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, the city of Whittier does not often come up in railroad discussions, yet it was served by three systems, wound up with an unusual track configuration after 1942, and is the location of the only remaining Southern Pacific Common Standard No. 18 depot in Southern California.

"Incorporated December 17, 1887, this was the name under which the Southern Pacific Co. constructed 5.9 miles from Studebaker to Whittier, California. Opened on March 16, 1888, it was operated by the Southern Pacific Co. and consolidated with the

Southern Pacific Railroad Co. on May 14, 1888. It had no rolling stock of its own." This brief entry in the corporate history section of Guy Dunscomb's *A Century of Southern Pacific Steam Locomotives* describes Whittier's first railroad, the Long Beach, Whittier & Los Angeles County Railroad. Given that this 1963 seminal work addressed a corporate entity that, at its peak, encompassed 16,000 miles of right-of-way linking eight states and the republic of Mexico, and was the product of consolidating some 300 predecessor companies, this cursory entry is understandable.

For the "Society of Friends" com-

munity that founded the little town nestled against the Puente Hills however, the arrival of that first train from Los Angeles was cause for much rejoicing. Contrary to conventional wisdom of the time, the Quakers chose a townsite in 1887 that proved to be removed from any of the large railroad construction projects planned for Southern California in the latter part of the 1800s. What initially prompted the mighty Southern Pacific to provide this link is unknown, but the \$40,000 put up by local business interests was definitely an added incentive. A 5.9-mile route was surveyed from Studebaker (actually Studebaker Junc-



A 2-story 12-lever mechanical interlocker was built at Los Nietos Tower (SP Tower No. 3), MP 153.4, in 1889 where the Whittier Branch crossed the Southern California Railway (later AT&SF 3rd District). The interlocker was rebuilt in 1901 and eliminated in 1942, the year this photo was taken. —James N. Spencer photo, courtesy Western Railway Museum

tion), a flag stop on SP's Santa Ana Branch, following a general northeasterly course across the flat but gently rising coastal plain to a terminus at Whittier. Total distance traveled from Los Angeles was 12 miles.

Published timetables for the period identified three stations en route:

Fulton Wells, two miles out of Studebaker, crossing at grade with Telegraph Road. Los Nietos, three miles out of Studebaker, crossing at grade with Los Nietos Road and the Southern California Railway (ATSF), and Evergreen Street, five miles out of Studebaker, crossing at grade with Evergreen Street (now Washington Boulevard).

Between Fulton Wells (the predecessor of today's Santa Fe Springs) and Los Nietos, the first appreciable grade—a short 1.5%—was encountered. At Los Nietos a spur for interchange with ATSF was provided along with a two-story, 12-lever mechanical interlocking tower to protect the busy junction. Pacific Electric's La Habra line (completed in 1911) was inter-



This Common Standard No. 7 passenger and freight depot was built at Los Nietos, MP 500.6, in 1888. —SP photo, courtesy Western Railway Museum



This Common Standard No. 7 passenger and freight depot was built at Evergreen St., MP 502.2, in 1888. It was later converted into Packing-house for the Southern California Fruit Exchange. —SP photo, courtesy Western Railway Museum



Southern Pacific's No. 18 passenger and freight depot at Whittier, California, MP 503.2 (Hadley St.), was completed in June 1888. This valuation photo dates from approximately 1912. —SP photo, courtesy Western Railway Museum



sected at a point near present day Sorenson Avenue. From there into Whittier proper, a fairly constant 1.5% grade was maintained. Total elevation gained on the branch was 240 feet. Rail was 50lb English Sheffield steel (mill date 1881) spiked directly to redwood ties without the benefit of tie plates (tie plates were installed in 1900). With the exception of the area around Los Nietos depot and the ATSF crossing, the railroad was cinder ballasted. Los Nietos had gravel. Crossing the normally dry creek beds and drainage ditches was accomplished with rudimentary open-deck timber trestles and culverts. The stations consisted of a passing siding and, in the case of Los Nietos and Evergreen Street, utilitarian, single story, combination passenger-freight depots to Common Standard No .7 plans. The Whittier facility was a more impressive, two-story Stick/Queen Anne-style structure (Common Standard No.18) with living quarters for the agent on the second floor. Passengers transferring to a Santa Ana line train at Studebaker were accommodated by a simple 24 x 12-foot shelter shed.

## Operations

Passenger service over the line was initiated in the spring of 1888 offering morning trains directly to and from Los Angeles and evening accommodations via a transfer at Studebaker to the Santa Ana line. Travel time to Los Angeles was one hour and ten minutes. With the completion of other branch lines to Tustin and Westminster, scheduling became more complex and the Whittier Branch was often treated as an adjunct to the more heavily traveled Santa Ana line. From 1905 to 1910, Los Angeles bound passengers were accommodated by a daily mixed train with transfer to Santa Ana Branch passenger trains at Studebaker. In 1910 passenger service was provided by a McKen gas-mechanical motor car that made a daily round trip between "downtown" Santa Ana and Los Angeles with a side trip to Whittier. This service was abandoned in 1913. The advent of the Pacific Electric line to the Quaker City, completed in 1903, with its shorter route

Whittier, Santa Ana and Tustin Branches.											
Daily			Daily			Miles.	STATIONS.	Daily			Daily Da
P. M.	Ex	Sun	P. M.	A. M.	A. M.			P. M.	Ex	Sun	
5.00	1.48	9.28				2	LV. Los Angeles. [Ar	8.57	1.20	4.41	P.
5.05	1.53	9.33				1	.....River Station.....	8.52	1.15	4.36	
5.07	1.55	9.35				0	.....Commercial St.....	8.50	1.13	4.34	
5.10	2.00	9.40				5	.....First Street.....	8.44	1.09	4.29	
5.24	2.14	9.54				9	.....Arcade Depot.....	8.29	1.04	4.14	
5.32	2.22	10.02				11	.....Florence.....	8.22	1.00	4.07	
5.37	2.27	10.07				14	.....Vinalve.....	8.17	1.00	4.02	
5.43	2.33	10.13				16	.....Downey.....	8.11	12.37	3.56	
						17	.....Studebaker.....				
5.48	2.38	10.19				17	.....Fulton Wells.....	8.08	12.29	3.50	
5.51	2.41	10.23				20	.....Los Nietos.....	8.01	12.27	3.45	
5.56	2.47	10.30				20	AR. ....Whittier... LV.	7.56	12.22	3.40	
						14	.....Studebaker.....	8.11	12.34	3.56	
5.43	2.33	10.13				15	.....Norwalk.....	8.07	12.32	3.52	
5.47	2.37	10.17				18	.....Carmenita.....	8.03	12.28	3.48	
5.51	2.41	10.21				21	.....Buena Park.....	7.57	12.22	3.42	
5.57	2.47	10.27				23	.....Brookhurst.....	7.52	12.17	3.37	
6.02	2.52	10.32				25	.....Anaheim.....	7.48	12.13	3.33	
6.07	2.57	10.37				27	.....Miraflores.....	7.44	12.09	3.29	
6.11	3.01	10.41	7.17			30	.....Orange.....	7.39	12.04	3.24	
6.16	3.06	10.46	7.23			32	AR. ....Santa Ana... LV.	7.35	12.00	3.20	
6.20	3.10	10.50	7.30			27	.....Miraflores.....	7.16	P. M.	P. M.	1
						30	.....Marlboro.....	7.07			
6.41						34	.....McPherson.....	6.54			
6.47						35	.....El Modena.....	6.50			
6.55						35	.....Tustin.....	6.45			
6.58							ARRIVE				
7.05							LEAVE A. M.				

In the early part of 1895, local service to Whittier connected with through trains on the Santa Ana Branch three times daily, except Sunday. —John R. Signor collection

and more frequent service, and an even more direct route to Los Angeles via a paved, all-weather county road spelled the ultimate demise of SP's passenger service to Whittier.

While passenger ridership never lived up to expectations, the role played by the railroad in the economic development of Whittier and the surrounding area was significant. Although the en-route stations provided some revenue and traffic (Evergreen was the site of an early fruit packing shed owned by Briggs Spence Co., and there is evidence that the depot itself was used primarily for fruit and produce shipping), the prime purpose for building the branch was to tap into the fledgling orange and lemon industry in the area surrounding Whittier.

Scheduled freight trains (typically one round trip, five days a week) served the growing city from the line's inception until 1930. Over the years the routing and scheduling varied from a side trip on the Los Angeles-Santa Ana trains to dedicated Los Angeles-Whittier trains. Often the schedule dictated a nightly layover in Whittier, returning to Studebaker the next day. In addition, extra freights were dispatched to provide timely pickup during the fruit harvest periods. After

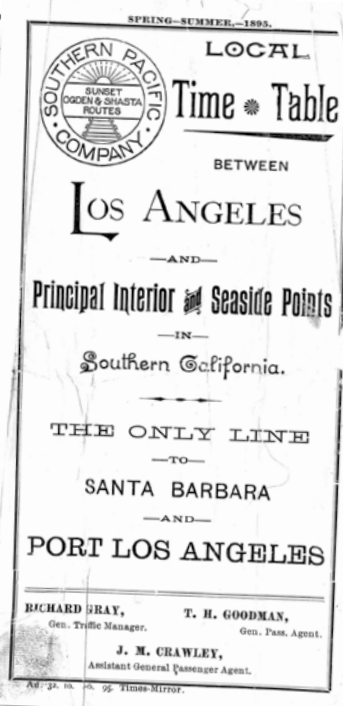
1930, freight trains were operated as extras on an as-needed basis, reflecting both the Depression-induced decline in business and the increasing competition from the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad (Union Pacific system) Anaheim Branch, which was extended through Whittier in 1917.

## Whittier and Environs

Approaching Whittier from the south, the right-of-way skirted the eastern boundary of the state reform school for boys (later the Fred C. Nelles School), crossed the county highway (Whittier Boulevard) and Philadelphia Street<sup>1</sup> before entering the yards bounded by Magnolia Avenue on the west and Hadley Street on the north.

Initially the Southern Pacific agent was housed in a retired box car next to the tracks, but after the new depot was completed at the foot of Bailey Street in 1891 he took up residence in the second floor apartment. The yard was initially comprised of the main track and two sidings with a crossover to permit the locomotive to run around the train for the return trip to Stude-

1. In 1903 a crossing was installed to accommodate Pacific Electric tracks which accessed uptown Whittier running up the center of Philadelphia Street.



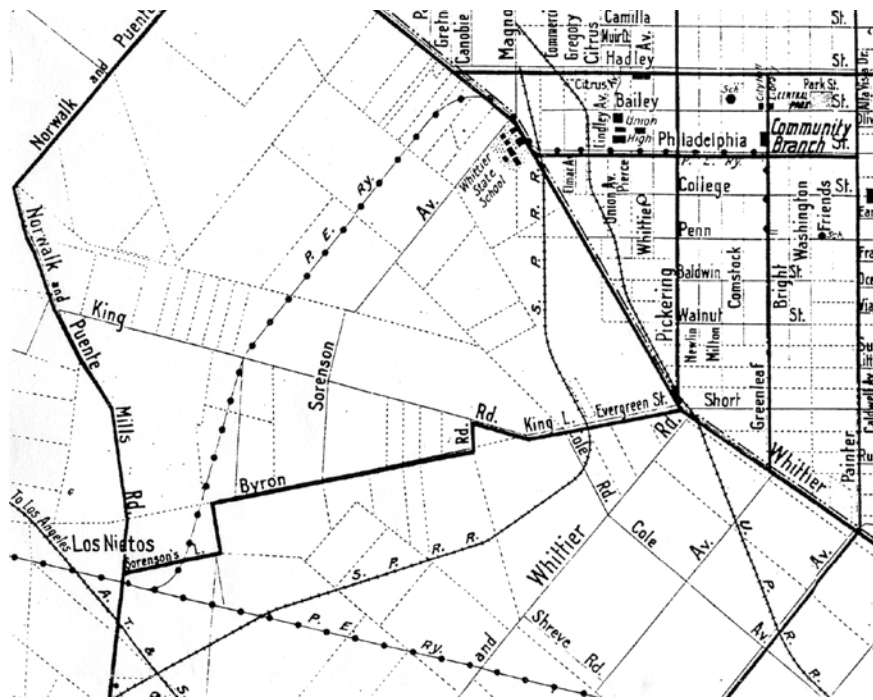
baker. A 60-foot manually-operated "armstrong" turntable was installed to preclude having to make the outbound trip in reverse.<sup>2</sup> To accommodate scheduling that dictated an overnight layover, a single-stall engine house was erected. A standpipe connected to the municipal water supply assured that the tender would not run dry.

SP also constructed a packing house across the tracks from the depot that was leased to various enterprises over the years. Initially it served the local walnut growers as a packing and shipping point, and later it was enlarged by the California Chemical Spray Co. as a distribution point for the various fertilizers and pesticides required by Whittier area growers. The freight house portion of the depot also doubled as an early fruit processing and packing facility until separate facilities were established by the Whittier Citrus Association and the Murphy Ranch operations.

In 1903 a crossing was installed to accommodate Pacific Electric, which accessed uptown Whittier via a track running up the center of Philadelphia Street.

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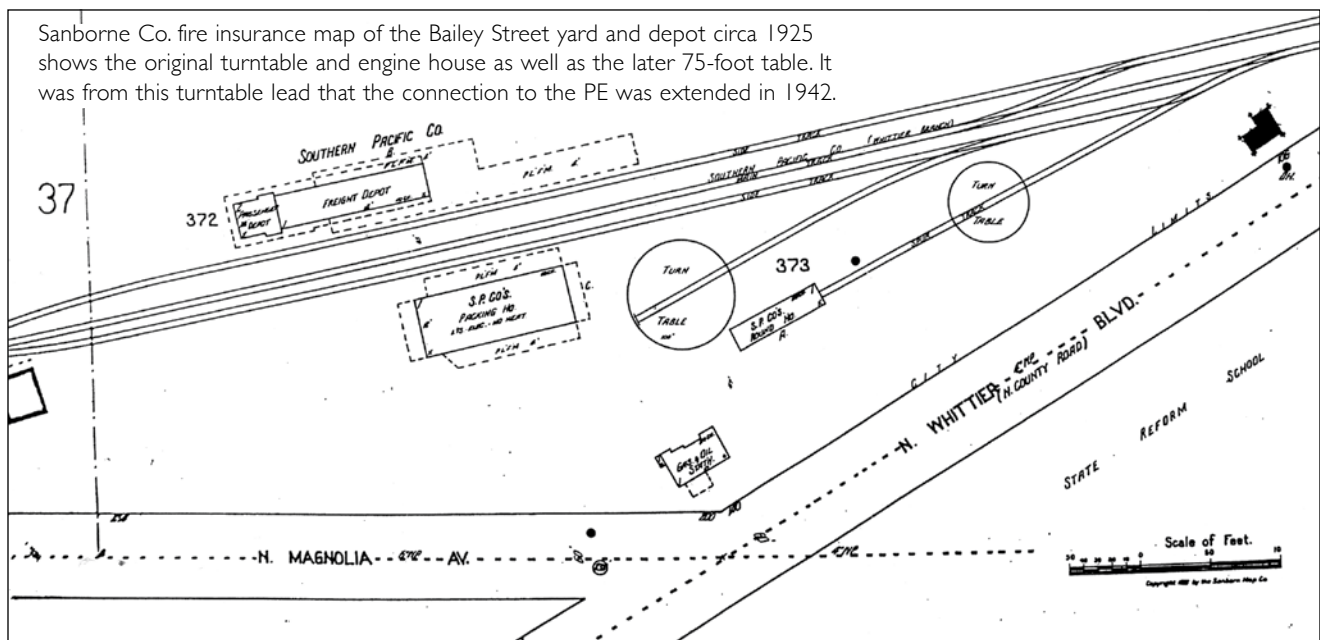
A portion of a "Midget Map" of Whittier, circa 1928, shows the basic alignment of all three railroads serving Whittier at the time. —John Nestegard collection

larger locomotives being assigned to the Santa Branch but, interestingly, the original table remained in place for a number of years.

### *The Smell of Orange Blossoms*

When the Pickering Land and Water Co. began development of the 1,200-acre site that would become Whittier, it touted the almost idyllic environment it offered for homesteading and agriculture. The soil was rich, the Puente Hills guaranteed an almost frost free climate and the recent intro-

duction of citrus horticulture to the area promised growth and prosperity for the Quaker community. The one fly in the ointment was the lack of adequate water supply to service both the growing community and irrigate the groves of oranges and lemons that were being proposed. The water table was too low for economic drilling and pumping and efforts to build dams in the Puente Hills to store rainwater proved futile. What little agriculture that was accomplished required the hauling of water overland from the San





## Whittier Detail

Summer 1942

Gabriel River.

Two events provided the impetus for the development of the citrus industry in Whittier. First was the completion of rail lines linking Southern California with the rest of the nation by 1883. The second was the construction, in 1892, of a 10-mile flume to bring artesian water from the banks of the San Gabriel River to Simon Murphy's 2,000-acre development just east of Whittier. The availability of a dependable, year-round source of irrigation water benefitted not only the Murphy Ranch properties, making them one of the most profitable in the district, but also the citizens of the city itself who were able to purchase any excess.

By 1902, the Whittier Citrus Association had been chartered and

the first packing house constructed on the southwest corner of Penn Street and Whittier Boulevard. To tap this new source of revenue, SP extended a spur track one-half mile south of the yard paralleling Whittier Boulevard. In 1916 the Murphy Ranch properties established its own facility on the northeast corner of the same intersection and the railroad reciprocated by adding a track to serve it as well. Southern Pacific provided the only rail freight service to Whittier until Pacific Electric extended a branch off its La Habra-Los Nietos line in Los Nietos in 1903. Although at the time primar-

ily a passenger hauler, PE did serve the Whittier Select packing house at Gretna and Whittier Boulevard, and a bulk oil dealer at the corner of Magnolia and Whittier Boulevard.

More serious competition arrived when the Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad (Union Pacific) extended its Anaheim Branch through town in 1917. The LA&SL provided the Murphy Ranch house with a double-tracked spur and accommodated the Whittier Fruit Exchange—which affiliated with the Sunkist brand in 1921—with a spur on the south side of its facility. The 1919-1920 crop year saw





Aerial view of SP's Bailey Street yard in Whittier on August 28, 1945. In this view from the southwest, the connection between the Pacific Electric and SP passes over the old turntable pit (barely visible) then behind the freight house before curving to the left and crossing Whittier Boulevard. Note the fresh pavement in Whittier Boulevard marking the location of the recently removed PE line to downtown Whittier. SP's Whittier depot is at the center, opposite the SP freight house. —UCLA Department of Geography, Benjamin and Gladys Thomas Air Photo Archives, Spence Air Photo Collection

a total of 3,281 carloads of citrus, with a market value of \$4,842,570, shipped from the district. By 1925, 10,000 acres of trees were under cultivation. The peak production of oranges and lemons occurred in the 1935-36 crop year when 4,000 cars were shipped to market, while 1942-43 boasted the highest dollar value—in excess of \$7 million. Ironically that was also the last season for the SP branch.

Picking season for Valencia oranges was mid-summer while Navels ripened in fall/winter. Lemons and grapefruit could be harvested at various time throughout the year. Packing house

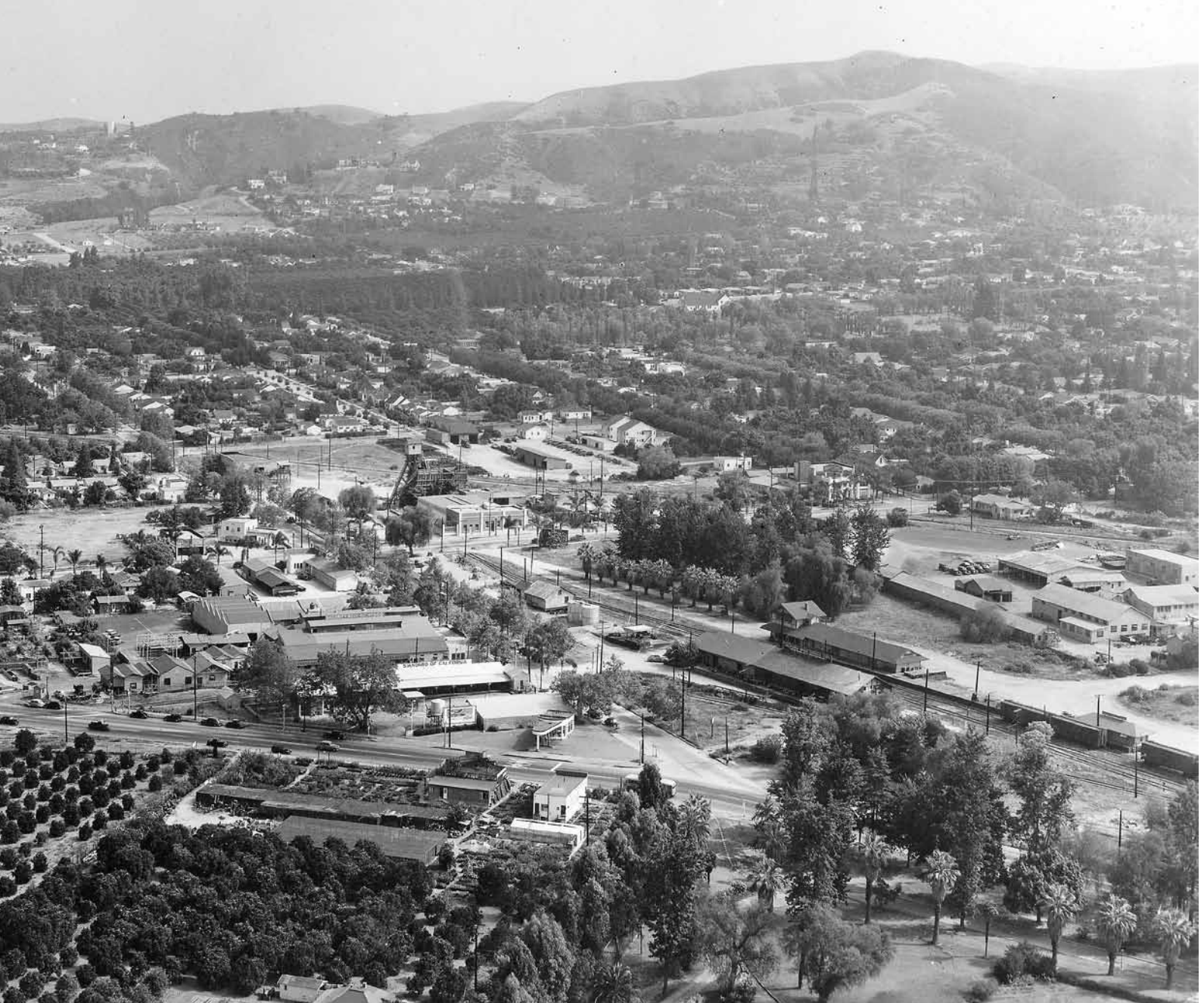
operations consisted of washing, waxing, grading, tissue wrapping and packing the fruit into wood shipping crates. Colorful labels, often incorporating original artwork, were affixed to the crates proudly identifying the point of origin. The products of Whittier's citrus orchards were loaded into 40-foot ice-refrigerated rail cars of the Pacific Fruit Express Co. for movement East.

#### *Other Industries and Revenue Sources*

Over its relatively short 54-year life span, a number of commercial enterprises developed along the Whit-

tier Branch. The “packinghouse spur” saw the comings and goings of a number of businesses that required rail access, such as Globe Mills feed mill, the Edmund Pecke Fruit Packing Co. (later Mutual Mfg. Co.—mattresses and pillows) the Citrus By-products Facility (juice concentrates) the Whittier Ice. Co.<sup>3</sup> the Whittier Fruit Cannery, a Union Oil storage facility, a shipping

3. There has been some conjecture as to whether the ice manufacturing facility, later affiliated with the Puritan Ice Co., provided icing services for refrigerator cars prior to loading of fruit at the packing houses, a process known as pre-cooling.



Pacific Electric EMD SW1 at Whittier depot in August 1950. The locomotive was leased from parent Southern Pacific for freight service as electric motive power was phased out. The trolley poles were used to activate crossing gates. —John Nestegard

Another view of Whittier on August 28, 1945, with the Puente Hills rising in the distance. The structure opposite the SP depot was composed of a freight house and a packing house, that latter portion by this time being occupied by the California Chemical Spray Co. —UCLA Department of Geography, Benjamin and Gladys Thomas Air Photo Archives, Spence Air Photo Collection

crate manufacturer and a lumber yard.

Across Philadelphia in the Bailey Street yard, there was the San Pedro Lumber Co., a cement manufacturing plant, and across Hadley the Whittier Brick Co. One of the sidings in front of the depot performed an important function as a team track. Railroad customers that did not have a spur track



Aerial view from the southwest in December 1939 shows the SP line along Whittier Boulevard serving the Murphy Ranch packing house, Whittier Citrus Assn. and the Whittier Walnut Growers Assn. The line at lower right is all that remained of the original line to Evergreen from which spurs were extended to serve industries locating in the large grove in the foreground during the postwar era. The Union Pacific Whittier station can be seen center left. —UCLA Department of Geography, Benjamin and Gladys Thomas Air Photo Archives, Spence Air Photo Collection

to their place of business could unload and load freight directly from their wagon, hence the term “team” or motor truck to a rail car. A number of car dealers in Whittier received their new automobiles in such a fashion aboard specially-equipped box cars.

### *End of the Line*

The 1930s and the disastrous economic downturn were not a good time for the SP and its Whittier Branch. Although the citrus industry in the Whittier district was in its prime and record crops were being achieved, the bounty had to be shared with the LA&SL—in fact the LA&SL served two more packing houses in Whittier, Mutual Orange on Hadley and Gregory Streets, and Sunset-Sternau Foods on Whittier Boulevard, south of Sunkist—and there was mounting competition from trucks utilizing the all-weather state highway (Whittier Boulevard) that had been recently completed all the way to Los Angeles. With the recession, other sources of traffic, both in and out bound, were shrinking or disappearing altogether. The depot and freight house at Evergreen Street was retired in 1938 and it became obvious to SP management that it could no longer maintain two, almost identical rail lines into Whit-

tier. The Pacific Electric had been a wholly-owned subsidiary since 1911 and its right-of-way into Quaker City was newer, constructed to heavier standards and was approximately three miles shorter (downtown Los Angeles to Whittier). The decision was made in favor of the PE line and the original SP trackage from just north of Evergreen depot all the way to Studebaker Junction was pulled up in August 1942. The rail and ties were later used to enlarge the port facility on Terminal Island in support of the recently-declared state of war with Japan.

Connecting the PE main track with the Hadley Street yard was accomplished by the simple expedient of a crossover installed near the intersection of Magnolia and Whittier Boulevard. PE electric locomotives took over freight duties from Southern Pacific steam engines. Overhead wire had to be strung to allow pickup utilizing trolley poles on the roofs of the locomotives. This also enabled PE to bring its electric box motors directly to the ex-SP depot and provide Railway Express service to Whittier customers. A PE freight agent took over duties in the depot and it wasn't long before a fresh coat of institutional blue-grey paint replaced SP's Colonial Yellow and brown scheme.

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### *Postmortem*

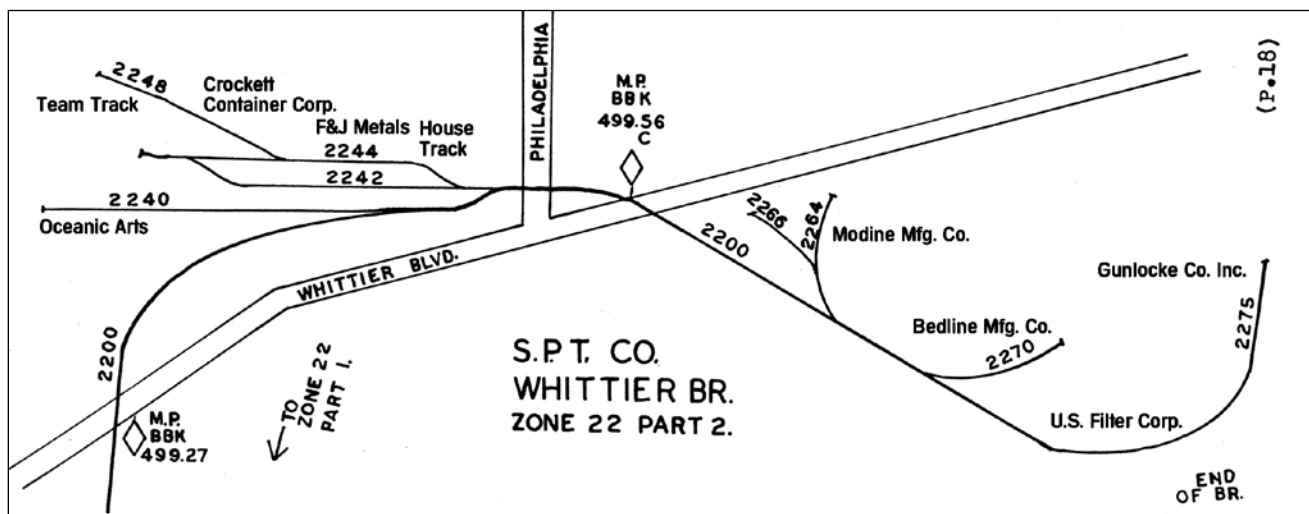
With the end of World War II, the citrus industry in the Whittier district began a dramatic downsizing. The reasons for this were two-fold:

Trees in many of the groves were over 25 years old and yields were decreasing. To remain competitive, growers were faced with rooting up the old stock and planting new trees, an expensive proposition that also meant not seeing a harvest for a number of years until the orchards reached maturity.

Service men returning from the Pacific campaign, particularly from the snow belt, having experienced the wonders of the Golden State, decided that here is where they wanted to put down roots. The results was a tremendous demand for new housing and the developers of Southern California were more than happy to accommodate.

From 1945 to 1955 the number of acres removed annually from farming—mainly citrus—to real estate development increased almost seven fold. Whittier was in the process of





By the time this Southern Pacific Spins map was issued September 28, 1979, tracks serving packing houses along south Whittier Boulevard had been removed, only to be replaced by several spurs serving industries off the stub track that led toward the former station of Evergreen. Within slightly less than a decade, all these tracks would be gone. —Clifford Prather collection

changing from an agricultural center to a Los Angeles bedroom community. During that decade the number of carloads of oranges and lemons shipped from the Whittier district dropped from 3,448 to 750 per year.

PE's electric locomotives continued to serve Whittier but gradually their duties were taken over by diesel locomotives. Beyond the citrus industry, which included support materials such as lumber for shipping crates, fertilizers, insecticides and fuel oil for smudge pots, Whittier had little in the way of industrial enterprise that required rail service. In the 1950s an industrial zone was created along

Whittier Boulevard east of the Nelles School. Several manufacturing plants required spurs off of the former SP main track, including an aerospace supplier called Modine Manufacturing Co. In the northwest corner of the Bailey Street yard a rather impressive facility was built by the Kieckhefer Container Co. for the manufacture of paper dairy cartons. The Whittier Citrus Assn. packing house had its last season in 1951 and the Murphy Ranch house closed its doors in 1954. PE soldiered on until 1965 when it was totally absorbed into parent Southern Pacific, which continued to serve a diminishing customer base until all the

uptown Whittier trackage was pulled up about 1990 and another era ended.

As Whittier moves on into the 21st century, there is scant evidence of its pioneering little railroad. A walking path follows the old roadbed along the east boundary of Nelles School, the "sweat room" of the Murphy Ranch packing house is used as a cold storage facility, the original 1902 building of the Sunkist (Whittier Citrus) packing house is now the home of an antique mall and, of course, the restored Bailey Street depot reign supreme as a regional transportation center in its new location opposite the Hilton Hotel on Greenleaf Street.

It should be noted that the southern portion of the Whittier Branch was reincarnated in 1954 when the old right-of-way from Studebaker Junction to Los Nietos was incorporated into SP's new Puente Cutoff from City of Industry, utilizing trackage rights over the UP to Bortolo Jct. then, on its own tracks following the San Gabriel River to Los Nietos and on to PE's La Habra line. This route provides a bypass around the congestion of downtown Los Angeles for freight moving to and from Los Angeles/Long Beach Harbor and Orange County. ●

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The SP depot continued to serve Whittier until January 30, 1967, when agency personnel were moved to Los Nietos. The depot was then occupied by a succession of industrial tenants until the mid-1980s. The City of Whittier took possession of the depot and in 1996 was awarded a \$1.2 million grant from Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act funds. The depot was moved to 7333 Greenleaf Avenue, and restored that year as Whittier's Transit Center. —Google Street View