

Emeryville COOL Fun Facts

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As a longtime fan of NHK World's *Japan Railway Journal*, I've seen the aftermath of many Shinkansen derailments. I never thought I'd see such an accident with my own eyes. This all changed on April 19 when a Union Pacific train derailed in our small town!

As I gazed upon the accident my mind raced: would we get to see a hydraulic jack in action?! Who made the call to the crane company on a Sunday?! And most importantly: I need more Emeryville train facts!

First, I searched the National Transportation Safety Board's database for other disasters in our area and couldn't find anything (can't wait for the April 19 incident report to drop!). Next, I read about the somber case of a

train hopper serial killer who struck on our railroad line here in 1996. Finally, I did a deep dive into historic East Bay railways. PLEASE TAKE A LOOK.

Several train lines once flourished here, including the East Bay Electric Lines train which ran along what is now the Doyle Street Greenway, and the Berkeley Branch Railroad, a steam train that ran from Emeryville to downtown Berkeley beginning in 1876. In 1911, the BBR was electrified and it became part of the East Bay Electric Lines (which was colloquially known as the "Red Train"). The East Bay Electric Lines ceased operation in 1941.

My personal favorite was created by a Borox mining magnate. The Key Route System was the brainchild of Francis Marion Smith, who really got into starting railroad companies (a great way to move your powdered soap out of the desert). The Key System's name was inspired by the shape formed by the rail lines (although I would personally say the key shape is a pretty loose interpretation, but everyone loves a good story!).

Back in the Key System days, 40th and San Pablo was a hotspot with the main train yard located at Sanny Pabs and Yerba Buena Ave. (now the home of Pak 'N Save). You could catch the train to see a baseball game at Oaks Stadium, then pick up a can of fruit cocktail at Cal-Pak on your way home!

When I first found out about the Key System years ago, I loved the archival footage of the train traversing the lower half of the Bay Bridge. You can see this Bay Area wonder online in the 1945 short film *The March of Progress* courtesy of the Internet Archive.

Please note that while user "Spuzz" describes *The March of Progress* as "an oddball film that just goes all OVER the map, and never really gets to the point til the final third and then wanders off again," I still think it's worth

watching. Spuzz's 2003 review also points out that there is even "a cute animated character which adds NOTHING to the film." Who could pass on that?

During World War II, the Key System temporarily expanded and ran trains directly to the Richmond Shipyard from 40th and San Pablo. The railroad was built using scrap material and decommissioned New York subway cars.

The Key Route's reign ended in 1958, and its privately-held services were replaced by public transit agencies AC Transit (which bought out the Key System) and later BART. P.S. if you want to have a good time with conspiracy theories, check out the demise of the Key Route as a factor in the GM Streetcar Conspiracy, which weirdly I had never realized is the basis for the plot of the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*!

Vestiges of the Key Route still linger on in the East Bay. I was most excited to learn that the mysterious tunnel behind the Target on the West Oakland-Emeryville border was actually a subway for Key System trains (and now leads to a sewer that is part of East Bay MUD).

NOTE: the Key System also included ferries, which leads to my perpetual question: **WHY IS THERE NO FERRY SERVICE FROM EMERYVILLE?!!?**

Fun fact for the Rail Fans out there: the Golden State Model Railroad Museum, which includes a 1920's-30's replica of the Key System, was housed at 4075 Halleck in Emeryville from 1940 to 1985 (when it moved to its current home in Point Richmond).



Do you have any memories of the Key System or other defunct Emeryville railways? Hot train tips to share? Ideas or stories for future issues?

Leave a message at (510) 519-7283

