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CALIFORNIA

Historic Bay Area model railroad steaming off to new home on Central Coast

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After a devastating wildfire and a move by its operators to sever ties, the historic Swanton Pacific Railroad in the Santa Cruz Mountains is finally steaming toward its new home – out of the Bay Area. Joe Rosato Jr. reports.

After a devastating wildfire and a move by its operators to sever ties, the historic Swanton Pacific Railroad in the Santa Cruz Mountains is finally steaming toward its new home – out of the Bay Area.

Cal Poly University announced it's donated the bulk of the Overfair Railroad and its cars to the private Santa Margarita Ranch in San Luis Obispo, ending a period of trepidation for fans of the beloved railway who feared it would once again be scattered to the wind.

“This is a really good thing,” said Molly Engelman, president of the volunteer Overfair Pacific Railroad Society whose members have maintained the trains for decades. “Of all the possible outcomes, this is one of the best ones.”

In recent weeks, longtime volunteers have been toiling at the Swanton Pacific Ranch near Davenport, loading ties, rails, switches, railcars and engines onto flatbed trailers for the trek to San Luis Obispo where they will share territory with the model Pacific Coast Railroad.

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“Essentially, if it’s not nailed down, it’s moving,” said Engelman.

The move ends the uncertainty in this latest chapter of the railroad’s long, historic and scattered life, which began more than a century ago when Louis MacDermot built the one-third scale steam train for San Francisco’s 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition.

The engines were eventually separated and scattered until the 1970s when Al Smith – a founder of Orchard Supply Hardware – collected the trains together and created the Swanton Pacific Railroad on his sprawling wooded property in the Santa Cruz Mountains. When Smith died in 1993, he donated the land and railroad to his alma mater Cal Poly University.

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The university continued to house the railroad with volunteers doing the bulk of the labor and maintenance. The ranch hosted gatherings with the steam trains hauling passengers around the property that included a station and working signal lights and switches.

But after the August 2020 CZU Lightning Complex Fire ripped through the land, badly damaging the trains and infrastructure, Cal Poly balked at the cost of rebuilding the railroad and announced plans to donate the trains to other entities. Volunteers were upset and feared the potential demise of the railroad.

“The biggest fear was that it was just going to disappear without anyone knowing,” said Engelman, who has been involved with the railroad since she was 3 years old. “Another fear is that it was going to be split up and scattered to the four winds.”



Volunteers with the Overfair Pacific Railroad Society load model railcars from the Swanton Pacific Railroad in the Santa Cruz Mountains onto trucks for transport to their new home in San Luis Obispo.

The university’s decision to donate the majority of the collection to the Santa Margarita Ranch appears to have allayed most of those fears. The private ranch is not only home to another 5/8 model railroad, it also includes vintage railroad cars that ran at Disneyland in the 1950s. The vineyard-covered ranch hosts weddings and events where visitors will eventually get to ride the pair of vintage railways once the Overfair Railroad is restored.

“It will rise again from the ashes,” said Jeff Badger, a noted steam engine expert who serves as general manager of the Pacific Coast Railroad at Santa Margarita Ranch. “There’s plenty of the metal left to replicate what once was here.”

Badger said the university’s donation to the ranch will keep nearly the entire railroad together and allow ample opportunities for current volunteers to continue their stewardship.

“Our ultimate goal is to get the whole band back together,” said Badger, who was helping to load old tracks for the move south. “That means all the locomotives and replicate a lot of the cars that were lost in the CZU Lightning Complex Fire.”

For Engelman and other volunteers who’ve invested thousands of hours of sweat equity into the trains, it’s a somewhat bittersweet conclusion to the plight of a railroad that’s already racked up plenty of history.

“There’s a disappointment that it’s not staying here,” Engelman said. “But we’ve had three years to cry over it. This is a new chapter and this is a new thing moving forward.”

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