

VOL. CXV NO. 5

MAY, 1959

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

MAY, 1959

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With 5 maps and 128 illustrations, 97 in color

PUBLISHED BY THE
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY
WASHINGTON, D. C.

\$8.00 A YEAR

\$1.00 A COPY

A humble little railroad hugs and hoots its winning way through the California forests

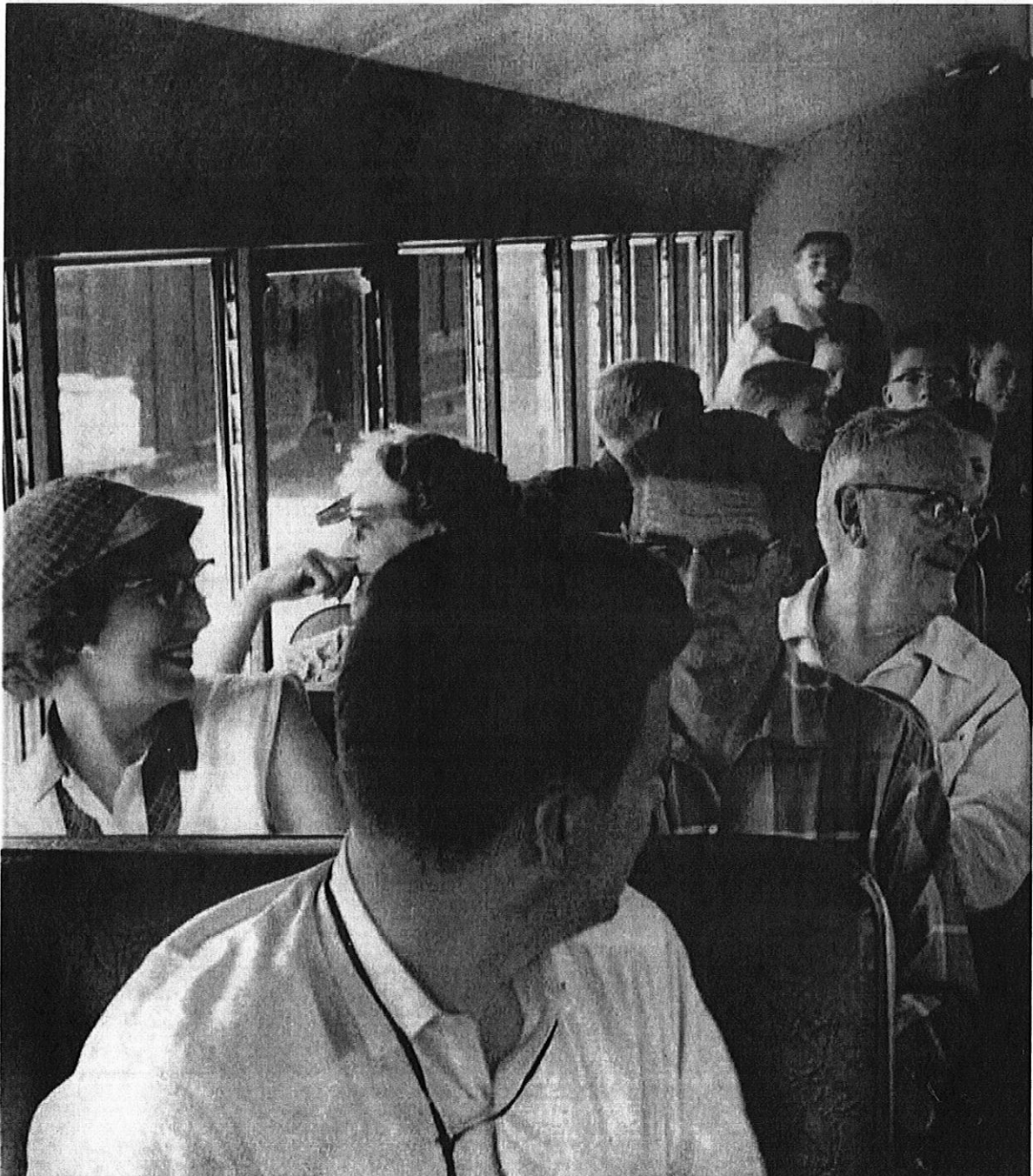
The Friendly Train Called Skunk

By DEAN JENNINGS

Illustrations by National Geographic
Photographer B. ANTHONY STEWART

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Sightseers at Fort Bragg happily await the conductor's "All aboard!" that will start



TRAIN NO. 1 of the California Western Railroad slowly twisted through the tall Coast Ranges forest 140 miles northwest of San Francisco one recent fine morning. It was climbing east from the lumber town of Fort Bragg to Willits, just across the divide.

Azaleas raised their bright little trumpets along the cool banks of the Noyo River, and the purplish heads of the rosebay nodded on the scarred, logged slopes of the hills. Wild vines threaded a blanket over the gullies, and the sunlight cut through the redwood groves,

slashing the gloom with dusty yellow blades.

Engineer Johnny Galliani, a stout, balding man wrapped in a bright Mackinaw, pulled his striped cap over one eye, peered through gold-rimmed glasses at the roadbed ahead, and told himself he had the happiest railroad job in the land.

At South Fork, 20 minutes out of Fort Bragg, he saw a woman waving an apron to flag him down, and he nudged Tom Golden, the thin, sandy-haired conductor. "What do you make of that, Tom?"

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their ride on California Western's one-coach train, affectionately called the Skunk



Conductor Golden Lifts Groceries Aboard

Because few roads cross the forest threaded by Skunk, the train crew delivers necessities to isolated families. Tom Golden recalls emergency orders for such oddities as bee-sting ointment and hot-water bottles. Jane Luiz often rides to Willits (map, opposite) to shop during a two-hour lay-over; she carries provisions home in her cart.



Golden squinted up the track. "Don't know," he said. "I've got her milk and paper, but she usually sends her son out for it."

The air brakes hissed, and the train stopped with a metallic screech. "Oh, Tom," the woman said, "I'm in trouble. The phone is out. My husband's sick with a bad cold, and I didn't do any marketing this week. I've got a list. Do you think . . . ?"

"Sure," Tom said. "Give it to me and quit worrying."

He swung aboard the train, gave the bell cord two cheerful yanks, and the train resumed its upgrade journey toward the Willits summit. Some hours later, downbound on the return trip, Johnny stopped the train at the forest ranch, and Tom trudged up the hill to the house to deliver groceries and some medicine. "I phoned the Doc," he reported. "He says to keep Ed in bed for a day or so."

"I sure appreciate it, Tom," the woman said. "I got some new-laid eggs for you. Figured you and Johnny could use 'em at home."

Golden accepted with embarrassed thanks and ambled down the stubbled slope to the train. There he assured half a dozen inquiring passengers that Ed was okay, and that his missus would have him up soon. The train pulled into Fort Bragg a little late, but Tom wasn't asked to explain, and there was no mention of the incident in his regular report. For that neighborly errand, like many others, was routine in the operation of one of the most unusual railroads in the world.

Gas Engine Gave the Line Its Name

"Fact is," the line's long-time General Manager, A. T. Nelson of Fort Bragg, told me before his retirement this year, "you might not call it a railroad at all. It's a family."

Affectionately nicknamed "the Skunk" because the original gas engine used to smell up the countryside, California Western's passenger train is known to railroad men all across the United States.

The entire train consists of one diesel-powered vehicle that looks like an old-time street-car (page 724). It carries everything—passengers, freight, mail, and luggage. Frequently, would-be travelers are left behind because all 40 of the car's seats have been sold. The baggage compartment carries mail sacks, and sometimes a bleating calf, a piano, or even a coffin.

For most of the year the Skunk makes one round trip daily between Fort Bragg, on the foggy Mendocino County coast, and Willits, a connection point for the Northwestern Pa-



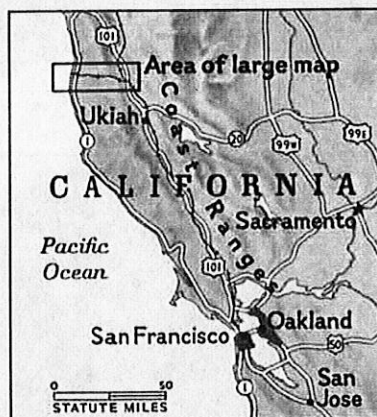
Alerting Tardy Riders, the Engineer Yanks the Cord and Toots the Horn
 Engineer Johnny Galliani stops the train anywhere he is hailed. He often picks up hikers dropped on an earlier run when they flag him at trackside. Skunk earned its name from an old gasoline unit's smelly exhaust.

Skunk's Tracks Thrust Inland from the Pacific

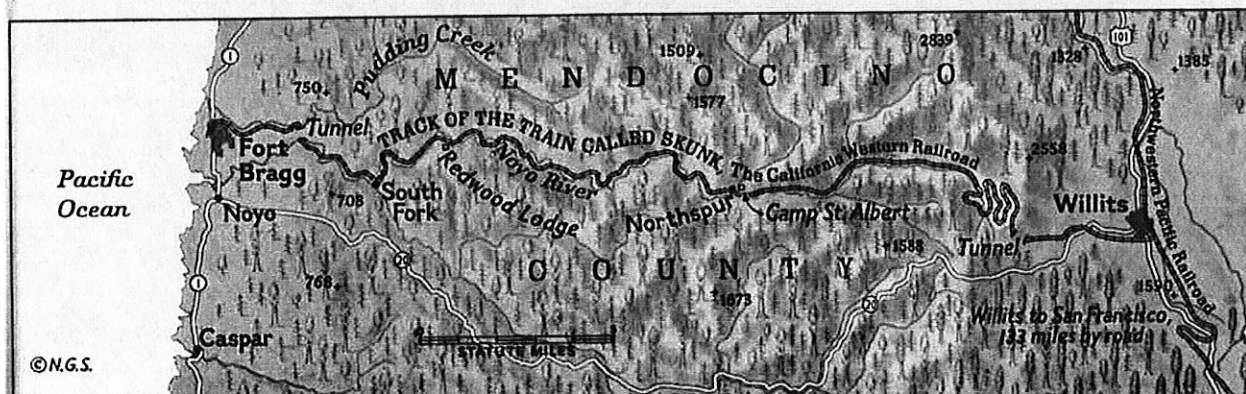
The California Western ties coastal Fort Bragg with inland Willits, where it meets the Northwestern Pacific. Between terminals it serves only isolated settlements and homesteads.

Because the California coastal plain rises steeply, so must the railroad. The track unwinds like a kinky string as it seeks toe holds in the forest.

Symbols represent redwoods and Douglas firs, many of which stand in tree farms. New plantings in Mendocino County cover 170,000 acres.

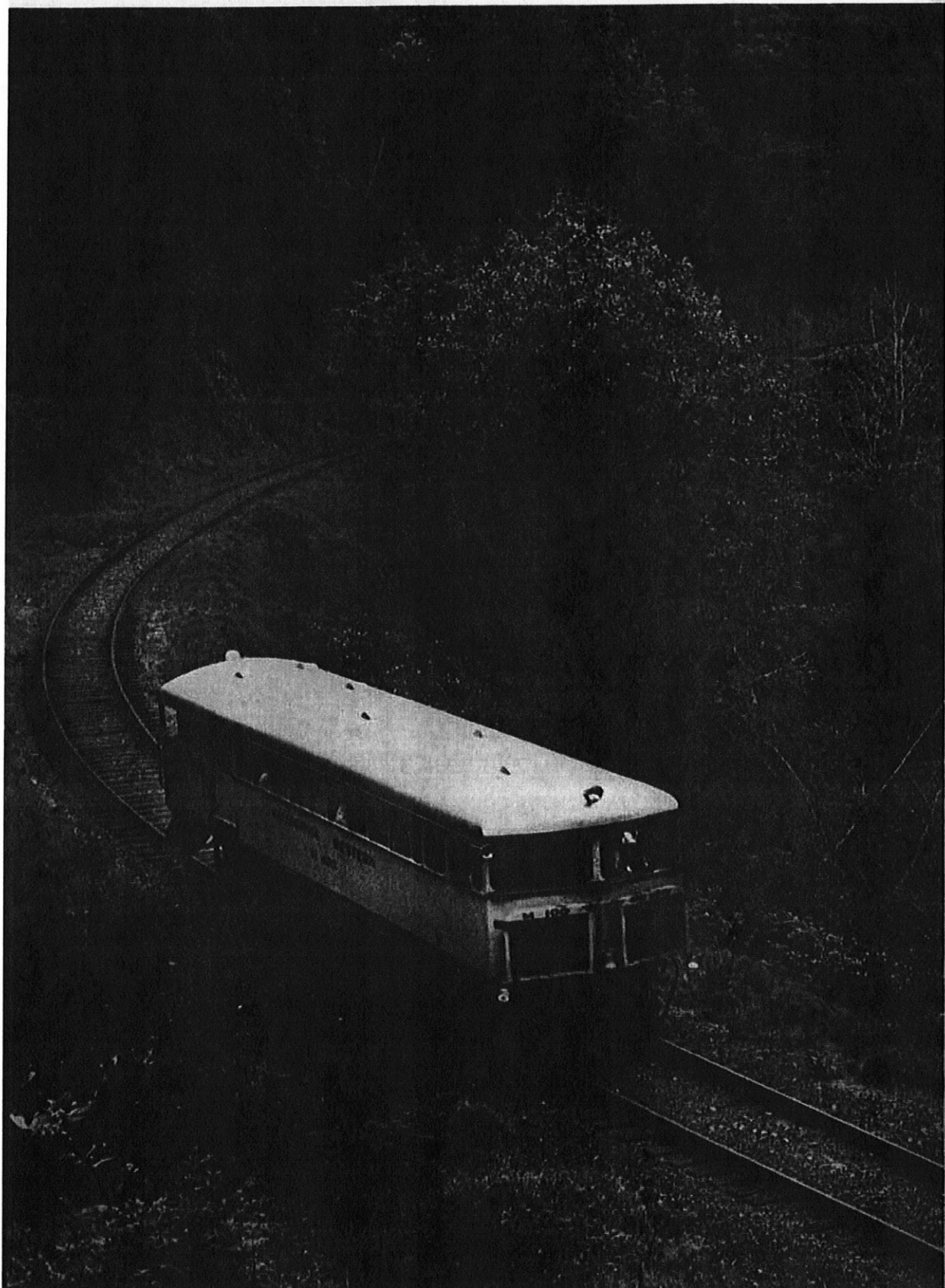


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**Pudding Creek, Near Fort Bragg,
Sends the Line on a Winding Detour**

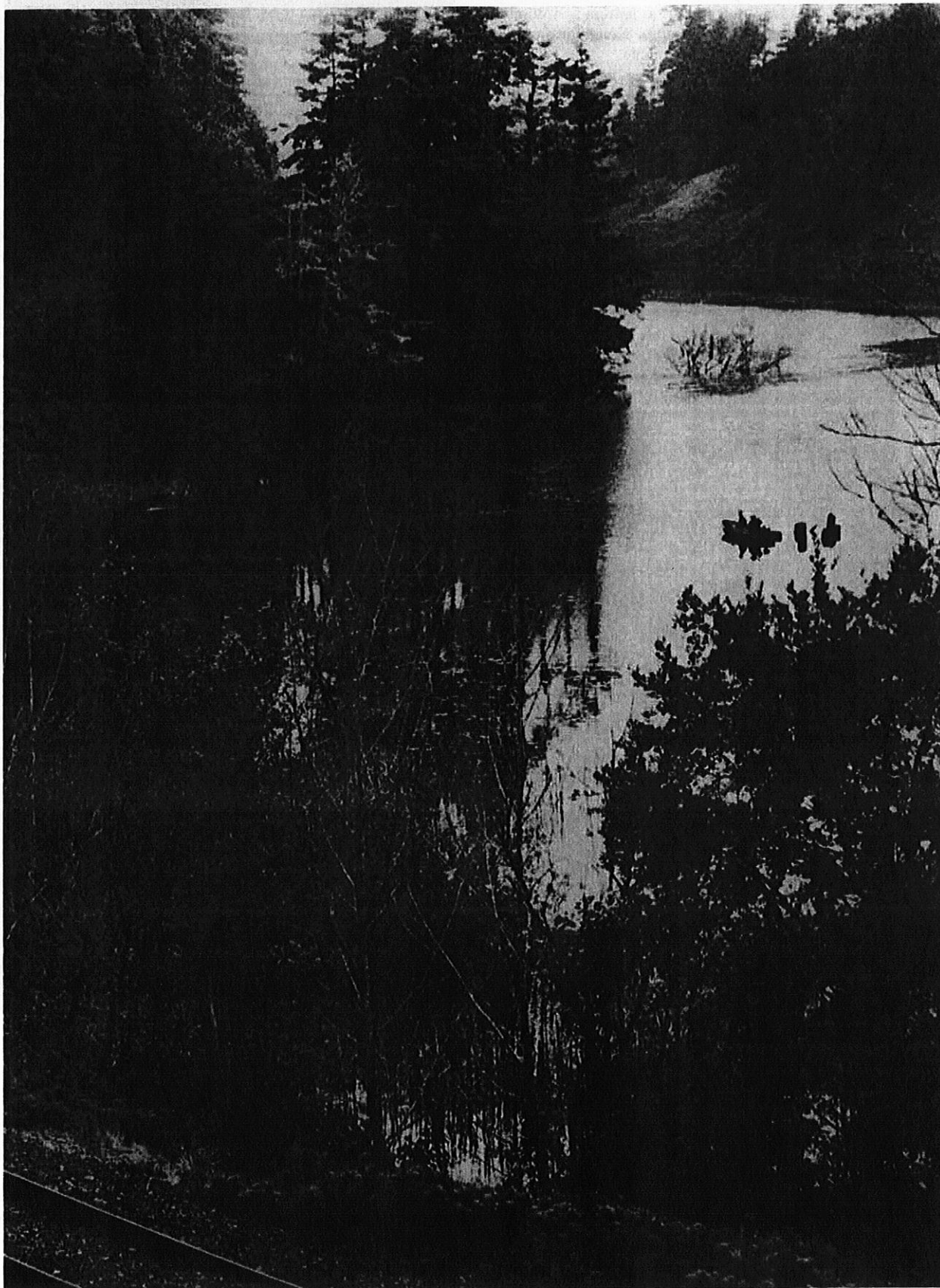
In 40 miles the California Western Railroad climbs 1,670 feet. Each trip Skunk rumbles across 34 bridges and trestles, swings around 331 curves,



and ducks through two tunnels. Built to haul logs from the redwood and fir forests, the line offers a scenic bonus to passengers as it spirals

through spectacular mountain country. Fishermen in this quiet inlet watch the train as it rounds a sharp curve hugging the shoreline.

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When neighbors ride the Skunk to the Dixons' forest cottage. Joe and Louise stoke their ancient wood stove and spread a bountiful lunch on an outdoor table. Joe, a retired lumberman, seldom goes to town except for a haircut. "Wouldn't live anywhere else," he says. Neighbor Jane Luiz helps the Dixons at this picnic.

Railroading groceryman Tom Golden swaps news with Louise Dixon when Skunk stops near her home. Mrs. Dixon usually meets him at trackside and collects her provisions.



cific's line into San Francisco (map, page 723). In summer it makes two round trips.

The 40-mile run pierces an area that ranks as a wilderness; highways serving it are inaccessible for much of the year. Three-quarters of a century ago, when the late C. R. Johnson bought up vast redwood stands for his Union Lumber Company, his engineers forced tracks through the deep forest and be-



gan hauling logs into the mill at Fort Bragg. Each succeeding year the loggers penetrated deeper, until in 1911 the track bed was pushed through a tunnel under a 1,740-foot summit and connected to the Northwestern Pacific tracks at Willits.

Now some 6,700 freight cars, mostly hauling lumber, rumble over the Skunk's route in a year's time, but the average visitor is un-

aware of their passage, for they move only at night. Thus the Skunk and its passengers have the tracks to themselves during the day.

A unique trip it is, too. There are 34 bridges and trestles to cross, one every mile or so; 381 curves make the route so crooked that one railroad historian said, "It twists like a snake with green-apple bellyache." The 17 intermediate stations aren't stations at



Skunk Barrels Out of a Leafy Tunnel into the Sun's Spotlight

The lumber boom that built the California Western has largely subsided. Today the area harvests mainly second-growth trees. Some large redwoods and firs still stand. Here, as in other places, branches lace a canopy above the track.

all, but only crude, weathered platforms or hand-scrawled signs that jut from redwood stumps.

The scenery is awesome, and at one point, where a series of compound curves corkscrews some 235 degrees all told, travelers can lean over a cliff and look 105 feet down on the writhing tracks the car has just left.

Forty years ago this section of the ride seemed so risky that now and then a nervous passenger would drop to his knees and pray, or so the newspapers of the period said. The late actor Wallace Beery once made a swash-buckling railroad movie there; after one hair-raising trip to the summit he refused to board the train again, and said he'd rather walk. On the other hand, when Jane Wyman was filming scenes of *Johnny Belinda* near by, she became enchanted with the Skunk, and the crew elected her a sort of unofficial mascot.

The Skunk people are modest and make no flamboyant claims for their run. "We have beautiful scenery, yes," Nelson says. "But we also give personal service, and the Skunk has earned the love of the people it serves."

This sentimental kinship between passengers and crew is kindled the moment Tom and Johnny trundle their yellow car from the railroad yards into the Fort Bragg station to start their daily run. Both men live in Fort Bragg; between them they have been on the California Western payroll for 83 years.

Almost any morning, especially in summer, the waiting room swarms with vacationers or local citizens—women in Bermuda shorts, jeans, or old Army pants; hunters with bright-red caps; fishermen with rods and creels; city folk self-conscious in business suits; booted lumberjacks heading for work in the woods. Children of all ages and dispositions swarm



about carrying pets, swim suits, space guns, and baseball bats to camps along the route.

"Young or old, they're all kids when they ride with us," says engineer Galliani. "Nothing like a ride on this train to take the years off your back and make you young again. I've been sitting in this cab a long time, but I never had a dull ride."

Youngsters Rate a Favored Spot

The trip starts at 9:45 a.m. Sometimes children are allowed to ride on the diesel engine hood inside the cab, where they can watch the engineer at his controls. Only a man with four children of his own, like Johnny Galliani, would have the patience for the job.

"A lot of our friends come here just for this one 80-mile round trip," Nelson says. "They fly in from Salt Lake or Los Angeles or some other distant place, and we don't like to turn them away. So we make up an extra train of flat cars and send them off happy. It may not be modern railroading, but it's a lot of fun."

The trip officially starts when Tom Golden, burdened with milk cartons, mail sacks, news-

Dogs ride free, but at arm's length from the conductor. Though once bitten, Tom Golden holds no grudges against well-behaved pets. 729



papers, and other items, climbs aboard and desperately looks for a vacant place to organize himself and his load. He gives the two-bell signal, and the Skunk wheezes, bumps, and rattles out of town.

"We don't have club-car comfort," Johnny Galliani says, "but it's good for the liver."

In a matter of minutes the train is beyond Fort Bragg's gray fog belt and past the city limits. It creeps into the woods at 20 miles an hour, a speed that exasperates an occasional city dweller. "No use rushing through life," Johnny says. "Too much to see."

Wildlife Abounds Along the Route

Any moment, as the car glides around a bend, a doe may spring down from the bank and bound along the ties until, with one frightened leap, she crashes into the sanctuary of the brush. Another time a brown bear may amble along the tracks, or a mountain lion may be seen, stalking a rabbit.

From time to time, as the tracks knife deeper into the forest, Johnny stops the car and beckons to impatient hunters.

"See that hogback up there?" he'll say. "Stand around there for an hour or so, and sooner or later you'll spot some big buck coming out to feed. We'll be back this afternoon and pick you up. And if you're not there," he adds kiddingly, "you'll spend the night with the bobcats."

Fishermen get tips from Johnny, too, for he has fished the trout streams himself. Picnickers are dropped off at inviting spots along the way—a glen canopied by the tall redwoods, or where the Noyo River lies like a mirror in a sun-washed meadow.

Such customers are picked up on the return trip, even if the Skunk has to wait, and often there are forgetful ones who have to be summoned with warning toots of the horn.

But while the Skunk is a delight to tourists and campers, it is also a lifeline to a dozen or so families who have permanent homes in the timberland. Some operate small sheep or cattle ranches; others are retired Union Lumber Company employees or couples from the big cities bent upon living in the woods. They lease an acre or two of land from the company at \$25 a year for five years, and are permitted to renew for indefinite periods if they have cared properly for the land.

To these people, who have no supermarkets, hospitals, or other conveniences, Tom and Johnny are all things—postmen, messengers,

food suppliers, first-aid crew, and personal friends. The grinding sound of the Skunk is music. The cheery blast from Johnny's horn gives its daily summons, and people come running from homes and gardens, from the riverbed and the hillsides (page 726).

Tom delivers their milk and their mail. He brings a case of beer or a bottle of liniment. He has the papers, or a fresh battery for a radio set, or some other item not carried as freight but brought as a neighborly gesture. People tell their troubles and joys to Tom, and even use him as a baby sitter if they have to go to town on the train and take the kids along.

"I bet I've spent more darn lunch hours with kids on my lap than any conductor in the country," Tom says with a grin. "We meet life every day in a lot of ways. And sometimes death," he added soberly.

One day last summer when the Skunk was coming down the mountain into Willits, Johnny saw three small boys hunting with .22-caliber rifles. There was a shot and a sudden pained cry, and Johnny saw one of the boys drop. He stopped the train, hurried to a railroad telephone booth beside the tracks, and in a moment was arranging for help.

Train Serves as Ambulance

A physician was waiting when the train brought the wounded lad to the outskirts of Willits. The boy had a bullet in his lung and would have died, the doctor said, without the prompt help of the train crew.

Because they are so familiar with the habits and needs of their wilderness wards, Tom and Johnny are always ready for emergencies not mentioned in the railroad operations book. They knew, for instance, that one young woman was expecting a baby, and they stayed on call at home for a few nights until, as anticipated, her husband phoned them for help. Johnny and Tom got a speeder, or work car, out of the shed in Fort Bragg, rode into the woods, and brought the woman back to the hospital. There, minutes after their breathless arrival, a new passenger joined the railroad family.

Another time, when a woman rancher was kicked by an ornery mule, Tom saw her limping and gave a helping hand. If one of the woodland dwellers meets the train with a snuffle, Tom will have aspirin and paper handkerchiefs on the return trip. More than once he's brought bee-sting ointment, or a hot-water



Towels and Bedding Hang from a Tree House Built on a Redwood Stump
Forest giants surround Redwood Lodge, a camp 10 miles from Fort Bragg. Given the opportunity, no young visitor ever misses a chance to climb to the snug tree house and spend the night. Ferns sprout around the stump.

bottle to relieve some rancher's aching back.

He's stopped the train often to take aboard a dog that wouldn't be left behind, and he's had arguments with newly born calves that get stuck in the track guardrail and have to be lifted off.

"It's all in the day's work," the conductor shrugs. "I'd hope somebody would do the same for me if I were living out in the middle of nowhere."

Trainmen Know Tragedy and Danger

The Skunk's journeys do not always have a happy ending. Tom and Johnny made one emergency run at night when an old friend phoned that he was having a heart attack, but he was dead by the time they reached his home with a doctor. Another time a war veteran to whom they had waved every day for a year suddenly and inexplicably dived headfirst across the track and was killed under the train wheels. To this day Johnny gets a twinge when he passes the spot, and once in awhile

he murmurs a prayer for his departed friend.

In the winter when the great green arms of the redwoods droop from the weight of snow, and when the wind savagely lashes the river and the forest, the Skunk crawls warily along the route.

Occasionally a tree crashes down across the tracks, and Tom and Johnny can't wait for help. They unpack the saws, chains, and hooks that are standard equipment on the Skunk, cut up the fallen tree, and drag the logs off the tracks.

Their passengers understand these crises, and there are few complaints if the train pulls into Willits or Fort Bragg two hours late. Indeed, at Christmas time both men receive scores of gifts from travelers who, though they may not pass that way again, remember some unselfish deed or a kind word as the Skunk made its humble journey through the woods.

"Our line is primarily a freight line," manager Nelson told me. "Year in, year out, like

Sister herds her flock of boys, who love to gather at the station and watch the train come in. Summer refugees from city streets, the boys enjoy a two-week stay at Roman Catholic Camp St. Albert. Boy Scouts also vacation in the area.





Carrying vacuum bottles and driftwood souvenirs from the Noyo River, Fort Bragg housewives arrive home after a picnic beside the railroad's right of way.

most railroads, we lose money on our passenger traffic. But we feel a community responsibility to the families living out there, and to the thousands of people who visit us, like relatives, again and again.

"There are also three big summer camps for boys and girls along our route, and those hundreds of kids couldn't get to the woods every year without the Skunk (page 731 and opposite).

Friendly Line Has Its Troubles

"The way things are with so many young people in the cities today—you know, gangs and fights and troubles with the police—well, we like to feel we're helping out. That's almost enough reason to keep the train going, profit or no profit."

Nelson said that truck competition and shrinking forest preserves are added threats to the little family railroad, and there are days when he doesn't like to think about the future.

But Tom Golden and Johnny Galliani are confident there will always be a Skunk, and they'll hang on until they're too old to lift a wounded boy, or carry groceries up a steep

hill to a friend's house. Johnny has already been on the job for more than 42 years, and has been rebellious only once.

Johnny was making a special trip one night in a car, since abandoned as obsolete, which combined the baggage compartment and the engineer's cab.

Together with other baggage, a coffin lay in the darkness behind his seat. A shroud of fog hung over the tracks, and Johnny was tolling a warning bell continuously as his headlight probed the gloom.

Just as he entered one of the two tunnels on the line, he heard a muffled grunt. His heart jumped. Then as he rolled around a curve, there came another grunt. Johnny stiffened but dared not look back. Ten minutes later, when he pulled into Fort Bragg, the stifled sounds from the rear had given him the shakes. He jumped out to soothe his nerves under the reassuring light in the station, and told his story to the baggage clerk.

"Hey, Johnny!" the baggageman called out a few minutes later. "I found your ghost."

Johnny returned cautiously, and found himself staring down at a crate containing an



Trainmen Check Watches, Though Time Means Little to Skunk

Tom Golden and Johnny Galliani indulge in the railroad man's time-honored ritual before starting out. Punctuality is striven for, even though Skunk often stops while Tom frees a calf caught in a guardrail or drops off mail to a housewife. The line's two-a-day summer schedule hangs in Fort Bragg's station window.

angry red pig. The pig emitted a spooky grunt, and Johnny forgot his dignity. He heaved the crate to the ground so hard that it broke open, and then, contrite, he spent half an hour chasing the escaped porker.

The experience unstrung Johnny to such an extent—or so they tell in Fort Bragg—that he finally took the general manager's advice to go far away, for a rest and new scenery.

A nice vacation it turned out to be, too.

Johnny spent most of it on a 900-mile round trip aboard the Coast Daylight, the fast Southern Pacific streamliner between San Francisco and Los Angeles. He chatted happily with railroad friends and observed operations with an expert eye.

In the end, however, he was glad to get back to his beloved Skunk.

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