

A Bit of Friant History

The area now known as Friant has been inhabited by white settlers since at least the early 1850's. Prior to that, it was an area where the local Indians lived in peace for several thousand years, gathering acorns and fishing along the river's edge.

Civilization came by way of a need for miners and others to cross the river. The area was alternately known as Jones Ferry or Converse Ferry (depending on who was operating the ferry). Converse Ferry was actually located near to the site of the town of Millerton, which is now under Millerton Lake, near Winchell Cove.

By 1854, there was at least an adobe building in the area. In time, there would be a hotel and livery stable, and a general store. William Hampton operated the hotel and nearby a general store was operated by the McKenzie family. Clara Hampton, William's daughter, would ultimately marry one of the McKenzie boys. There was also a cash store located near the livery stable. There really wasn't much to the town of Hamptonville, as it came to be known.

In 1891, Marcus Pollasky created the San Joaquin Valley Railroad in an attempt to access the mining and lumber areas across the river up in the mountains. The RR grade was to cross the river along the Cottonwood Creek drainage, near present day Friant Dam, and continue all the way to the Minarets area. But there was not enough financing, and this railroad never went past the San Joaquin River.

On Aug 9, 1891, Marcus Pollasky and SN Griffith bought Hamptonville, all 420 acres. The new town they laid out would be the industrial hub of central California. Industries would include a box factory, ice house, broomstick factory, planing mill, flour mill, furniture plant, and a hydroelectric plant with a 100' dam at the old Millerton town site. This proposed dam would also provide irrigation water to farmers in the valley. It was hoped that this would become the

recreation center of California, as people would come for the cool river waters. They placed ads in newspapers hoping to sell land and home sites. Ingvar Tielman, who was the Fresno County Surveyor at the time, laid out the townsite, which would be named "Pollasky" after Marcus Pollasky.

On Nov 26, 1891, a huge BBQ was held at Hamptonville to celebrate completion of the RR...almost. Due to a shortage of supplies, the tracks were about a ½ mile shy of the town. But this was no big problem. 2000 people arrived in two special excursion trains of 12 cars each to the new town of Pollasky. Extra cars were "borrowed" from the Southern Pacific Railroad, which was involved in some ways in building the San Joaquin Valley Railroad. People walked from the end of tracks to the BBQ site in front of the Hamptonville Hotel.

In a speech that day, Pollasky said that "The citizens honored me...." by naming the town after him. This was Pollasky being Pollasky, the big talker, again. The fact is that he owned the whole town, so he could name it whatever he liked.

The BBQ was huge...10 sides of beef with a dozen chickens encased in each were roasted over coals while basted in butter in front of the hotel. Additionally, eight dozen chickens, 10 roasted pigs, two dozen turkeys, a dozen roasted hams, 2000 loaves of bread, 50 gallons of coffee and 25 gallons of white wine were consumed by the attendees.

During the BBQ, a Southern Pacific surveyor, Joseph Urban, got in a fight with Fulton Berry, Vice President of the railroad, over seating at the dining table. Berry was presiding over seating of the diners. Urban had a bad temper and was in a violent mood. He was swearing and being boorish in front of some ladies. Berry told Urban to act like a gentleman or face the consequences. Urban attacked Berry with a horn handled hunting knife. He slashed Berry's throat. Dr Maupin, a somewhat famous doctor from Fresno, was present and quickly saw to Berry's wounds with 12 stitches. Berry survived, and the attacker was chased, beaten, arrested, and nearly hanged on the spot. He was taken back to Fresno on a special train.

Due to a lack of business, the SJV railroad would soon be bankrupt, and the Southern Pacific RR would take over everything. The railroad had little business and was mostly quiet, as was the town of Pollasky. There were a few rock quarries near Pollasky, and some packing houses and wineries that would eventually pop up along the line and provide some business.

The town of Pollasky became Friant in 1910, named after Thomas Friant of the White and Friant lumber company. The "Friant Branch" of the SP would see lots of use after 1912, when Pacific Light and Power, and later Southern California Edison Co., would use most of the line up to El Prado for delivery of materials, supplies, and workers to the construction camps of the Big Creek Project. El Prado was near the intersection of Willow and Copper Avenues, and this is where the San Joaquin and Eastern Railroad, sometimes called the Slow, Jerky, and Expensive RR, branched off the SP and headed for Auberry and Big Creek. Materials for the Big Creek powerhouses, Huntington Lake dam, Shaver Lake dam, Florence Lake dam, and all the connecting pipe and electrical equipment would be delivered over the Friant Branch. The railroad used a field at what is now Willow and International Avenues as a staging area for all the construction materials. Before the Willow International Community College was built, a person could metal detect in that field and come up with small treasures. The SJ & E was removed for scrap in 1934.

In 1922, the Madera Sugar Pine Lumber Company in Madera started to build a mill in Pinedale and two railroads to Central Camp, above Bass Lake. The Minarets and Western Railroad joined the Pollasky branch at Pinedale Junction, which is located at Willow and Sheppard Ave., and then ran north. It then continued over the San Joaquin River on the roadbed that the SJVRR had graded, but never built. A large bridge was built to cross the San Joaquin River. Some of the footings for this bridge still exist near the base of Friant Dam, along Cottonwood Creek. The M&W RR continued to Wishon at Bass Lake, where the M&W Railroad terminated.

The Sugar Pine Lumber Co. Railroad picked up the empty cars at Wishon and delivered them to Central Camp for loading. The loaded cars were returned to Wishon by the SPLCO RR, and handed over to the Minarets and Western RR for delivery to the mill in Pinedale. Both railroads were owned by the Madera Sugar Opine Lumber Company. From Pinedale, the Southern Pacific would haul the finished lumber down the Pollasky Branch to Fresno, and ultimately to points in the east.

The lumber company sold lots in Pinedale and created that town for its workers and others. The Madera Sugar Pine Co. did what the SJVRR wanted to do, it accessed the milling timber belt, but at a different location. The M&W RR ceased operation in late 1933, and was abandoned in 1934.

The SP continued to make some money on the Pollasky Branch, however. There were still lots of agricultural products being shipped. There were at least two wineries still in operation, and several fruit packing houses along the line, and the gravel quarries in the San Joaquin River.

And then the Federal government decided to build Friant Dam in 1935. The dam was built using local materials, from a quarry located about 3 miles south of Friant at Rockfield. SP trains hauled sand, gravel, rock and other building materials to the Dam site in Friant. Groundbreaking for the dam occurred in 1939, 50,000 people attended. The dam was completed in 1945, and Millerton Lake was filled for the first time.

This was the last real hurrah for the Pollasky line. In 1961 SP applied for abandonment from Rockfield to Friant, signaling the beginning of the end for the Pollasky Branch. Slowly, other pieces were abandoned or relocated. Two tiny pieces still exist, one is north of Shields Ave, running along Clovis for a few hundred feet. The other is south of Olive, again running along Clovis Avenue for a few hundred feet. A portion of the railroad has been made in to a walking and bike trail in the Easterby Ranch area, and along Clovis Avenue through Clovis to the Willow International Community College.