

ECV James Savage Mariposa Battalion Chapter 1852

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History Lecture

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Marcus Pollasky & The San Joaquin Valley RR.

Marcus Pollasky was a wealthy lawyer (liar) from Alma, Michigan. He was a promoter and businessman, fast with words, loved talking, loved the trappings of wealth, was somewhat mysterious, and raised lots of suspicions. But in the end, he was the man mostly responsible for the building of the San Joaquin Valley Railroad, from Fresno to Friant. That railroad quickly became part of the hated Southern Pacific, which stoked the fires of those who felt Pollasky was an agent of the SP.

Mistakes, myths, and misconceptions abound in the Pollasky story. Here are but a few:

- He came in 1889, or 1890, or 1891 (take your pick)

- He planned to build a transcontinental RR

- His intent was to defraud the citizens of Fresno

- He was given the town of Clovis by Clovis Cole

- He ran off with \$100,000

- He was proven an Agent of the SP

- He stole the rights of way for the RR.

- He disappeared into the night when the RR went belly up

Pollasky's first visit here with William Nelson and Gilbert Osmun (Michigan lumbermen) occurred on Jan. 5, 1890. Lumber, timber, minerals

SP had a monopoly. Transcontinental RR rumors were that SJVRR would start in Fresno, Madera, or Merced, and then over the mountains, possibly through Sonora or Carson Pass, connecting with

the Carson and Colorado, or the Virginia and Truckee, and then to points east. Lots of local support!! **"We have almost all the rights of way already secured,"** he stated, which was a huge lie. Pollasky went to NY and Chicago to secure investor money.

Feb 1891, Pollasky returned, ready to build RR, engineers with him ready to begin surveys. From Fresno, **"We will build to the San Joaquin River and the Minarets."** They had no route surveyed yet. **"We have all the money necessary for 100 miles,"** (another big lie). He claimed this money was all from investors in SF, NY, and Chicago.

The RR was incorporated Feb 25, 1891 - contract - Fresno will raise \$10,000 for rights of way, and another \$100,000 payment subsidy to Pollasky for oversight of project. RR to run from Fresno to timber milling belt - 75 to 100 miles, 1 year deadline for completion.

The route ran from I street and San Diego street in Fresno, through East Fresno (Tulare and First) to Ben Woodworth's Las Palmas Ranch (McKinley and Clovis Ave.), then north through where Clovis is now, to Hamptonville, then into the mountains on north side of San Joaquin River. The survey continued into the mountains north and east of Hamptonville, at first up Finegold Creek. But, that route was quickly abandoned in favor of an easier route from Hamptonville up Cottonwood Creek, and then up the Finegold Creek drainage past North Fork.

Fitzgerald Brothers of Oakland were the construction contractors. They built SP roads and bought all their supplies from the Pacific Improvement Company, the land development arm of the SP.

Pollasky spent a lot of time in San Francisco, a frequent guest at the Palace Hotel. He was regularly seen at the Third and Townsend headquarters of the SP. All of this created more suspicion that Pollasky was actually working for SP.

July 4th, 1891, huge 4th of July parade and ground breaking at I and San Diego Sts. Lots of speeches and hoopla. Fitzgerald Bros. paraded all their horses and equipment down the street.

According to reports of the day, during grading, a reporter saw a transit being used by Pollasky that was marked "SP". When asked about it, Pollasky said it belonged to his brother, Sam Pollasky. He never had a brother named Sam.

Aug 9, 1891, Pollasky and SW Griffith buy Hamptonville (420 acres) Their plan was to create create power and provide irrigation water for Fresno and the valley. The new town they laid out will be the industrial hub of central California. Industries will include a box factory, ice house, broomstick factory, planning mill, flour mill, furniture plant, and a hydroelectric plant with a 100' dam at the old Millerton town site. This will also be the recreation center of California, as people come for the cool river waters.

Nov 26, 1891 (Thanksgiving), a huge BBQ feast was held at Hamptonville to celebrate completion of the first phase of the line, 25 miles from Fresno (within 1 mile). Hamptonville was named for William R. Hampton, a local hotel operator and the first postmaster. Besides Hampton's Hotel, there wasn't much to the town. Hamptonville had previously been known as Jones Ferry and Converse Ferry. Converse Ferry was originally at Millerton, about 3 miles upstream, now covered by Millerton Lake, in the area near Winchell Cove.

3000 people arrived at the BBQ, riding from Fresno in special trains to find the town renamed Pollasky. **"The citizens honored me...."** , Pollasky said in his speech that day. The truth is that he bought the whole town and could name it whatever he wanted. Pollasky hired Ingvar Teilman, Fresno County's chief land surveyor, to lay out a town site. Street names included "Waldby," named after Pollasky's wife's family, and "Marcus," named after himself. Those streets still exist today.

During the BBQ, an SP surveyor got in a fight with Fulton Berry over seating at the dining table, and slashed Berry's throat with a hunting knife. Berry survived and the attacker was chased, beaten, arrested, and nearly hanged on the spot. He was loaded onto a special train and taken back to Fresno.

Dec. 10, 1891, Pollasky paid \$4,000 in gold coin to Clovis Cole for a wheat field, and George Owen's vegetable farm next door. Ingvar Tielman again surveyed and laid out the new town. Cole demanded that the town be named after him. It would ultimately be called "Clovis", because there already was a railroad town called "Cole" in northern California, near Weed. The streets of early day Clovis were named Fulton, Pollasky, Woodworth, Dewitt, Osmun, Hughes, honoring the directors of the RR. There was no town there before the railroad.

SJVRR built three depots...at East Fresno (SJVRR design), at Clovis (SP design), and at Pollasky (SP design). Right of way money to Pollasky was never paid...only \$1,000 of the \$10,000 subscribed...most right of way was donated, some taken through condemnation, some traded for other land. Once completed to the town of Pollasky, there was no money to build further.

The depression that occurred due to failure of the financial markets in the early 1890's really hurt the SJVRR. The panic of 1893 sealed the fate. It also did in most of the heavy lifters of the railroad, including Thomas Hughes and Ben Woodworth (Las Palmas Ranch). The railroad did not cover its building or operating costs, because it was never completed past Pollasky, and there wasn't much business. SJVRR went broke, Pollasky lost nearly everything, ultimately leaving town in early 1892. He got his subsidy, which only amounted to \$86,000, not the \$100,000 he was promised.

Locomotives, rolling stock, everything had been "borrowed" from the SP by Pollasky, but were actually leased to SJVRR. RR assets were about \$463,000, The SP bill for leased equipment was \$463,000. Through Pacific Improvement Company, SP took over. SP called it the Clovis Branch, most people later called it the Friant Branch.

Was Pollasky an SP agent? He later admitted that he worked with CP Huntington on a "joint venture", and brought suit against Huntington in

1897. Rumors were that CPH set him up as SJVRR president for \$250 per month salary. He was to build and run the railroad for two years. The idea was to stop other RRs from assuming Walker Pass as a route for another transcontinental railroad. Pollasky's suit against CPH was dismissed in 1900 when CPH died. Pollasky got nothing.

Pollasky didn't run and hide as some claimed. He left Fresno for SF, and stayed there for quite some time before moving to Seattle and other places.

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 most of the Big Creek powerhouses, Huntington Lake, Shaver Lake, 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 Clovis 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.

Starting in 1921, another railroad, the Minarets and Western used the entirety of the Friant Branch, and actually used Marcus Pollasky's surveyed but never graded route into the mountains. The M&W ran from Pinedale, Ca to Central Camp, through Bass Lake and directly over the top of Crane Valley Dam. Madera Sugar Pine Lumber Company created the Minarets and Western to haul logs down from Central Camp to Pinedale where they were milled into lumber. The SP then hauled them to Fresno and points east. The M&W was removed for scrap in 1933.

Rockfield, near the intersection of Friant Road and Little Dry Creek was used as gravel quarry for many years. SP hauled gravel to be used as ballast out of Rockfield and onto their main line in Fresno. In the early 1960's SP decided that branch line service was no longer needed, so they discontinued trains between Rockfield and Friant in 1961. It wasn't until 1977 that SP shortened the line to Copper Avenue (Gordon) and left Rockfield to the trucks. In the mid 90's, the remaining line between Tarpey and Copper Avenue was abandoned and removed. But a portion of the line between Tarpey and McKinley Avenue is still being used by the San Joaquin Valley Railroad.

Information in this report came from research done over the past 50 years by Professor Firetruck (Dan Carrion). Issues of the Fresno Morning Republican, San Francisco Morning Call, and several other newspapers of the 1890's are the primary source of information for this lesson.