

TRAIN HEAVEN



Engineer Bob Barter, left, of Montclair drives the Golden Gate Live Steamers' locomotive. Below, Gordon French fuels 'Tich' with miniature coal.

Photo: Engineer Bob Barter, left, of Montclair drives the Golden Gate Live Steamers' locomotive.

Train Heaven

THE MONTCLARION — Tuesday, July 14, 1992

Text: Linda Aube-Benarano, Photos: Christina Koci

Up above the smog, among the tall pines, redwoods and wild flowers of Berkeley's Tilden Park, generation after generation of Oaklanders have shared the magic of steam railroading.

On any sunny Sunday afternoon, thousands of people ride the Redwood Valley's Little Train and the Golden Gate Live Steamers' mini-train. The majority of the riders are adults.

The Little Train operates year-round and goes through 1-1/2 miles of wooded vistas, canyons and a miniature tunnel. Its open-air cars are comfortable enough for adults and close enough to the scenery to keep children interested.

Forty years ago, when owner/operator Erich Thompson leased the land from the East Bay Regional Park District, the area was full of scrub and brush. He transformed it into a verdant forest with its own irrigation system and more than 600 trees, including Coast and Mountain redwoods.

Thompson, a retired track engineer with Western Pacific Railway, has resisted commercialization. He's intent on preserving authenticity down to the last detail.

"We don't want a carnival atmosphere," Thompson said, "We try to keep it a class operation. We are strictly adult-oriented, accurate in our reproductions, rules and practices. We've got to be," he says. "We carry about 65 percent adults."

Single rides for all ages cost \$1.50; a five-ride ticket that can be used anytime is \$5. Children under 2-years-old ride free. A short walk down the hill from the Little Train provides an opportunity to see even smaller trains. And, if it happens to be Sunday between noon and 3 p.m., The Golden Gate Live Steamers, a non-profit club started in 1936 whose mission it is to encourage the hobby of steam locomotive building, offers free rides. (Donations are appreciated, however.)

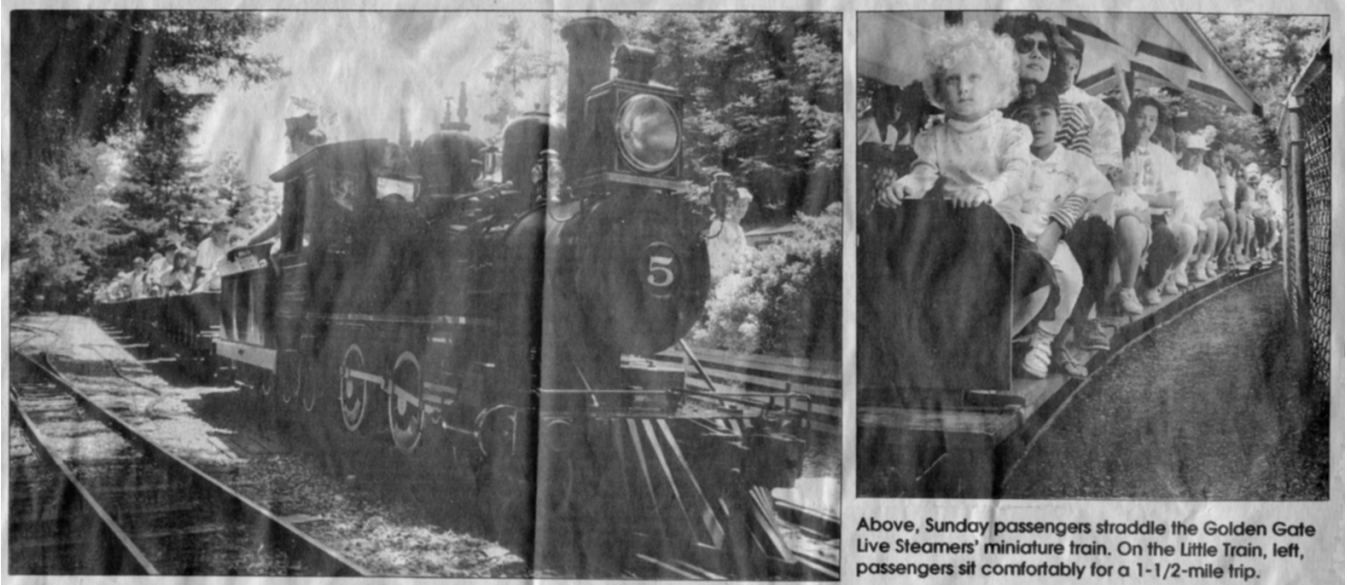
Although these rail cars are pulled by a real locomotive, the riding experience is far different from that of the Redwood Valley's Little Train. Because these are tiny trains, the speed is significantly less than the park's other larger train, taking six minutes to cover the half-mile of track.

The cars are not sit-in, they are sit-on-top-of. As many as 30 people can ride behind the six-foot long, 900-pound replica of the Missouri Pacific Engine 1160.

Sitting astride the rail cars, volunteer engineer and Montclair resident Bob Barter tells his riders not to drag their feet, shift their weight from side to side or reach out to grab anything.

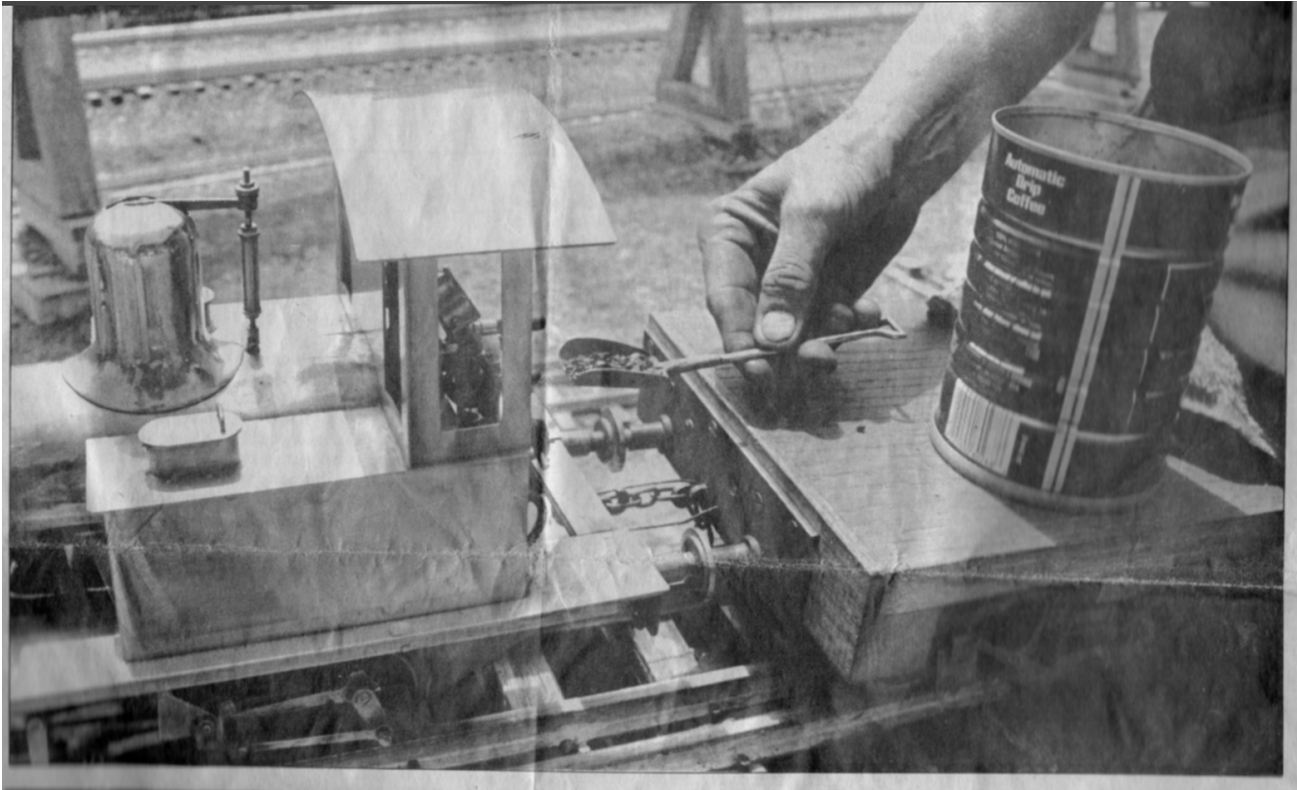
Barter drives the steam train through wooded scenery, passing by miniature towns and an impressive miniature round house where members store their engines.

Barter, an electronic engineer with the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, says he likes to work on the passenger run, because he enjoys seeing the kids and talking to people about the trains.



Above Left: On the Little Train, passengers sit comfortably for a 1-1/2-mile trip.

Above Right: Sunday passengers straddle the Golden Gate Live Steamers' miniature train.



Above: Gordon French fuels "Tich" with miniature coal.

p.s.,

At the time, "Santa Fe Style" Tri-Tip sold for \$1.98/lb.,
Garden Fresh Leaf Lettuce sold for 27 cents each,
and a 64-ounce bottle of Minute Maid Orange Juice sold for \$1.00