



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Riding the Cannonball Express at Railtown 1897 State Historic Park

All aboard!

Well, good afternoon folks. I'd like to welcome you to the Cannonball Express here at Railtown 1897 State Park. I hope you've had a chance to look around some of the other things we have to show you here. It's a very interesting spot. It's very unique among state parks. We'll be talking a little bit about that as we're underway down the track.

First, let me introduce myself. I'm Donald, and I'm one of the many volunteers here at Railtown—about 90 percent of the folks you see working here are volunteers. We do this because we love the history of the Sierra Railway and the California State Railroad Museum's program, and I in particular am pleased to have you here as our guests on the excursion train, which we call the Cannonball Express.

Now before we get underway there are a few safety suggestions—let's call them suggestions—that I'd like to share with you because this is very important. We have a great safety record here at Railtown, and we'd like to keep it that way. So we need your assistance with this. Number one, please don't hang your head, arms, legs, other body parts outside the train as we're underway. We'll be passing by a water tower, some rocks, and particularly some trees that haven't been cut back quite far enough yet this year. And we do have a law here in the state of California that states that if your head gets knocked off and goes rolling down the track, that we're not allowed to retrieve that. You must do that yourself.

Number two, please no running. We do have several passenger cars on the train, and there are moving parts between the passenger cars. We do encourage you to walk anywhere you wish among the three cars—go to either end—wherever you can get a good view, take a nice photo shot. But we don't want you to run, and this is particularly important for the youngsters we have with us today. Number three, please no drinking, no consumption of alcoholic beverages or smoking while we're on the train.

While we're speaking of smoking, let me point out if you took a look as you were getting on the train today and having your tickets punched, you may have noticed that there's an area beyond the freight shed, from whose dock you boarded the train, where there was a large telephone pole that was scarred and covered with charcoal. That's the result of the most recent fire that took out the second of the two depot headquarters that were there. Fire was always a big problem on the Sierra, as it was everywhere in the Mother Lode. And the tradition of being very, very careful about fire persists to this day. We worry about fire as we

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worry about every other point of safety. So, if you will, please no smoking. And rule number four is a very important rule, and let's see if anybody knows rule number four. Do you know rule number four? We do have a good answer here—a gold star for this guest. Rule number four is have fun. It's a rule that I always enjoy following, and I hope you'll join me in it.

Now I mentioned that we had a couple of fires here at Railtown, as well as some other buildings have been replaced over the years. There are only two buildings on site here that are still standing from the 1897 era. One of them you just saw, that's the freight shed. If you took the roundhouse tour, you also saw the machine shop, which is the second of the two buildings. Everything else here in Railtown is either newer than that era or has been replaced.

Well, why do you think we're called Railtown 1897 State Park? It's because in 1897 the three original owners of the Sierra Railway began building the line from Oakdale, which is 41 miles to our west in Stanislaus County, up here to Jamestown, which became the headquarters of the Sierra Railway. Now put yourself back over a hundred years ago. You're a resident of Jamestown, or of Sonora, and the railroad is going to come to town. What difference is that going to make in your life? Well, for one thing it might have taken you the better part of a day to get down to Oakdale or Modesto. Now that trip will take about a quarter of the time—you're going to be able to get back and forth between here and the Central Valley in a very short period of time. You're going to have goods, produce, all kinds of material delivered to you more quickly.

By 1902, when a branch line was built to Angels Camp, you would be able to get from Jamestown to Angels Camp in a short period of time as well. Now you will have noticed that we are passing a water tower. This is the fourth of the water towers that's been on site here. Up until last year I could have told you that we were passing the "Petticoat Junction" water tower, but unfortunately that water tower, much as I have done, got old and rickety and had to be replaced. Fortunately, from my point of view, they haven't replaced me here yet. I'm still enjoying my time at Railtown. But we now have a water tower, the one that you've just seen, that more closely approximates the original design of the water tower that was originally constructed in 1897.

That was two longs, a short and a long—the signal that the train is approaching a grade crossing, and we'll wave to our friends that have stopped to watch us, haven't they, out of their own free will. Our facility, our rolling stock, and the beautiful countryside that we're seeing as we roll through the Sierra foothills were perfect for filming old time movies, particularly westerns, which were very popular in the 1940s and 1950s. Matter of fact, our Locomotive No. 3, which is the oldest locomotive in the shop, originally built in 1891, was known as the movie queen—had some other titles—but it is the most filmed locomotive in the United States. Those of you who have seen the movie "Back to the Future III" will remember the scenes with Engine No. 3, particularly when it got up to 88 miles an hour and pushed the DeLorean motorcar "back to the future."

It's beautiful out here now—lots of sunshine. May not seem so, but we do get a lot of rain up here in the winter. In those days there were no paved roads—you wouldn't have been riding around in a car, you would have had a horse and buggy or just a horse, perhaps one of those new-fangled bicycles, built for two. But the roads would have turned to mud, and all major construction projects came to a halt.

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About nine miles of track have been built on the Yosemite Short Line, an additional fifteen miles of roadbed graded, and then they were surveying beyond that—kind of unusual. While we think of many ethnic groups providing assistance and workers up here to build the Mother Lode, it's not often realized that the Japanese as well as the Portuguese, Chinese, Mexicans, and other ethnic groups did play a part in this multi-cultural enterprise. They were about to re-start work early in 1906 and the chief construction engineer on the line, Mr. William Newel, he had the signed contract for that Japanese group on his dresser in the Palace Hotel in San Francisco; it was the night of April 17th, 1906. He was rudely awakened the next morning at 5:12 am, and what was it that would have awakened him on April 18th?

VISITORS: Earthquake.

GUIDE: Yes, it was the big earthquake of 1906—and the subsequent fire that destroyed much of San Francisco. Well, all of the backers of the Yosemite Short Line pulled their money out of the plan, to rebuild San Francisco, and not one more inch of that line was built.

We're passing over—just passed over—the Mother Lode. Now I'm as guilty as the next person in using the term Mother Lode to refer to the entire area up here in the Sierra foothills where gold was found. But actually it has a very specific meaning, and it refers to the rather narrow band of gold-bearing rock, primarily quartz, extending 140 miles from Mariposa in Mariposa County to our south, north to Grass Valley and Nevada City. I see some of you looking over here to the north and the little valley down below us. That is Wood's Creek. Wood's Creek is important to us because it was the site of the first discovery of gold in our county, Tuolumne County, and that was in late 1848. Many of you probably know that the original discovery of gold in all of California took place earlier in 1848, a bit to our north, up in the Coloma area north of Placerville and east of Sacramento.

Well, I'm going to ask you to put your imaginations to work again. We're going to put ourselves before the train even arrived here in Tuolumne County back in 1848, '49, '50—no tracks coming through here, but this wouldn't have been a quiet area for all that. This valley would have been swarming with miners who had either staked out claims down by the stream or were taking water back up to the hills around us and panning for gold.

If you look across the valley to our north, almost on the horizon, you'll see a horizontal line of gray rock. That's the edge of an open pit gold mine, the Jamestown Mine, owned by the Sonora Mining Company. It operated for a fairly short time, from 1986 to 1994, then it went out of business primarily because the price of gold had dropped to the point where it was no longer economically feasible to retrieve the gold from the ground.

We're about to pass over what was at one time the highest wooden trestle on the Sierra line. We talked a little bit earlier about diesel replacing steam as the mode of power on trains. This took place primarily back in the late '40s, early 1950s. If you look below you now, we're going over that trestle. Well the diesels could drag heavier loads along the right-of-way here, along the line, and it was felt that the old wooden trestle would not be able to bear those loads. The Sierra had a couple of choices—one was to replace the wooden trestle with a steel or iron trestle, but they took a less expensive way out and filled in the trestle with rock from the quarry that we are now approaching. This is the Hatler Rock Quarry. This is known as Rock Siding.

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We're now at the halfway point of our journey. We've chosen this spot not for its scenic beauty, as you will have guessed, but because if you look out alongside the train to our south, you'll see a sidetrack. Now what's going to happen here is that our venerable Engine No. 2, which is by the way a Shay engine built by the Lima Locomotive Works back in 1922, our Shay Locomotive No. 2 is going to de-couple from the west end of the train, it's going to switch onto the side track, come alongside . . . move down, switch onto the main track, then back in to the east end of the train, couple up and take us back to the station.

Folks, there you can see Wood's Creek once again. It's estimated that between 60 and 80 million dollars worth of gold was taken out of this creek in a fairly short period of time, making it one of the richest strikes in the Mother Lode. Now that's 60 to 80 million dollars in gold of those days, of course it'd be worth a lot more today.

By the way, take a look outside here. We're passing through a sort of a rock cut here. Most of the rock you see along the right-of-way here is serpentine. Can anyone tell me what the special relationship is between serpentine and the state of California? Little trivia question. Yes?

VISITOR: Is that where gold was found? In the serpentine?

GUIDE: Well, it was found in this area here. But, particularly, the importance of serpentine is that it's the California State Rock.

Well, folks, we made it. We're back here at Railtown 1897 State Park. I'd certainly like to thank you all for joining us today. I hope you enjoyed the ride on the Cannonball Express, and I'd like to invite you—we do have 26 acres of park here and there's much more to see. We do have the roundhouse. If you haven't had a chance to either take the roundhouse tour or to look around the roundhouse from the doors looking inside, please do so. I had mentioned the Angels branch, which was built in 1902. The switchbacks up and down the sides of the Stanislaus River Canyon there were so narrow and sharp that they had to build little shorty cars to go around, and you'll find cars No. 5 and 6, painted green, inside the roundhouse. Please take a look at them. They're a little piece of history that I think you'll find interesting. They were also used in filming some movies and TV series. Also, we have a movie prop area that you'll find very interesting over on the far side of the roundhouse, and we have many other things to look at. Also, take advantage of the picnic tables out here. I hope everybody followed rule number four—which was to have fun. I certainly did. It's really been a pleasure having you here. Now, I'd like you to drive safe going back home, and whatever you choose to do the rest of the afternoon, please have fun and come back and see us again sometime. Thank you very much.

Running Time: 23:45
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