MENDOCINO LUMBER COMPANY
Railroading on Big River
By DON BURLESON

Mendocino Lumber Company engine Number 1 unloading logs at the dump into Big River to be floated down to the mill at Mendocino in the early period when it still had the full dummy cab and the logs were big virgin timber. From Randolph Brandt collection.

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ROSTER OF LOCOMOTIVES OF THE MENOCINO LUMBER COMPANY

1. 0-4-2T Baldwin 11/1880 #5353 ex-Park & Ocean R.R., #1 delivered in 1900, retired 1923 purchased new 35-ton scrapped during World War II purchased 2nd hand Fort Bragg RR #3, delivered 1923, wrecked.

2. Climax 2T Climax 4/1902 #302 ex-Navaro Railroad, delivered Jan., 1907, scrapped WW II

3. 2-4-4T Ricks & Firth 1888 -

4. 2-4-4T Baldwin 1884
It has been claimed that the first rails in the newly formed state of California were laid from the beach near the mouth of Big River to the mill perched atop the north headland of Mendocino Bay in the year 1853.

This came about because Henry Meiggs, entrepreneur of Gold Rush days in San Francisco, needed new machinery for his sawmill at Bodega. Meiggs sent E. C. Williams east to obtain a gang mill, with boiler and steam engine, which was en route around the Horn by the spring of 1852.

Williams, crossing the isthmus at Panama, beat the equipment to San Francisco and was able to join an expedition sent up-coast by Meiggs to confirm reports of vast stands of timber reaching to the water’s edge. Even with its small capacity the Bodega mill had exhausted its supply of trees and new resources were needed to supply the burgeoning, often conflagrated, City by the Golden Gate.

Williams reported enthusiastically on fine stands of redwood and pine, as fir was then called, and when his machinery arrived it was transshipped to Big River on the brig Ontario, Captain David Lansing, master.

The vicissitudes of beating up an inhospitable shore against a northwesterly half-gale in a craft with a sieve-like bottom are related in detail in several places. The July 15, 1912, issue of the Pioneer, Western Lumberman contains memoirs in which Williams recounts the difficulties of the voyage and the problems of erecting the first mill at Mendocino.

The Redwood Lumber Manufacturing Company was incorporated in 1853 with a capitalization of $300,000. The mill was completed that same spring and commenced cutting 50,000 feet daily, with shipments made by sea, weather permitting.
The constant, near-gale winds so roiled the waters of the bay that original plans for floating logs out the river and herding them into a cove lying beneath the mill had to be abandoned. No man-made barrier could withstand the pounding of the waters; logs simply broke loose and washed out to sea.

A new boom was constructed half a mile upstream whence logs, loaded on cars, were hauled to the mill by horses. The tramway ran across the flat river beach to the bluff leading to the plateau atop which Mendocino was taking shape as a mill-town. Here horses were unhitched and led up a winding trail to a capstan which, using their power, hauled cars to the upper level. Re-hitched, the horses then delivered their loads of logs to the mill.

Gang mills proved unsuitable for the size logs coming from Big River's virgin forests, so a second mill was built on the flat near the river boom later in the fifties. The mill on the point was phased out and that location became exclusively a shipping point. The rail line, with its incline, thereafter hauled sawn lumber for shipment and air-drying along the bluff top.

The famous lumber schooners which constituted the dog-hole fleet worked close in to receive loads by chute or sling. These vessels, at first driven by wind power, became in time known as "steam schooners" when outfitted with engines. They continued until World War II as the basic means of getting north coast lumber to market.

The rails from the river-side mill to the incline used horse power until the lumber business ceased at Mendocino. The incline very soon substituted steam for the horse powered windlass, which was replaced in turn by electricity. Along the bluff-top the rails were serviced by horses, but in time a rubber-tired Holt tractor hauled the tram-cars. It could run all over the yard on its rubber-tired wheels. Another gasoline powered "locomotive", powered by a Buick motor, but confined by flanged wheels to movement on the rails, also served the upper level trackage.

In a March, 1925, issue of the weekly Mendocino Beacon, mention is made of a monorail which hauled lumber from storage areas to the chute-house. This entire area has become part of the State Park System and old ties still remain imbedded in the ground to show where some of the rails ran among stacks of lumber in drying and storing areas.

Meanwhile, Big River provided the means for getting logs from woods to mill. Fire destroyed the operation on the flat which was replaced in 1861 by a...
larger mill. Logs were held in an elbow of the river just east of the mill by a boom made of floating logs chained together to prevent loss of free-floaters.

About five miles upstream was The Boom, a natural pool in the river where logs were assembled for floating on the tides to the mill boom. Above tide-water logs could only be floated to the Boom on freshets, natural or man-made. Francis Jackson, native-born to "old-timer" parents, after years of meticulous research, recently published BIG RIVER WAS D Anved. Tramping over the entire 400 square miles of the river watershed, he located the sites, often the remains, of most of the several dozen dams used to create controlled freshets on which downed timber was floated to The Boom. His book makes fascinating reading of this phase of logging the Big River watershed.

Bull teams were used to bring logs over corduroy roads to points where they were dumped for such flotation. Later, high-lines and other means were used to get logs to the river. There had also been talk of using rails to bring log out of the woods, and in 1887 rails were reportedly laid into the Laguna, a swampy area along Laguna Creek, a short distance above the "old" Boom. No mention appears in the Beacon of actual operation on this line. Rails were actually sent up-river as early as 1883, and some were even "laid on grade," but there mention stops.

Most information about construction and operation of a railroad in Big River woods comes from files of The Mendocino Beacon, a weekly started by William Heeser in 1877. In 1900 railroad building received much attention in the paper. A mile-and-a-half had been graded between Perkin's Camp and Fraser's Landing to reach an area that had been logged 25 years previously. Superintendent J.C. Ford was quoted as saying there would be no locomotive until 1901.

Then, in July, 1900, less than two months later, the Company purchased a 17 ton engine from the Park and Ocean, a street railroad which ran along the south side and west end of Golden Gate Park. The paper reported that the engine came up from The City by sea, was transferred in the bay to a lighter, then floated over the bar into the river, thence upstream to The Boom.

In 1902 the Company equipped a barge-like vessel with a donkey engine and paddlewheel to guide log rafts from Boom to mill on ebbing tides. It also guided supplies and other lightered loads upstream on incoming tides. How that first lightered engine was powered the five tortuous miles to The Boom in 1900 is not mentioned. Probably horses were used along the banks to tow and guide the barge, with much poling by those on board.
This river "tug" operated from 1902 for almost 20 years when she was retired and replaced by a similar vessel. Superintendent Ford reputedly christened her "Maru" after seeing that name on a Japanese ship on San Francisco Bay. Her successor bore the same name.

The August 18, 1900, issue of the Beacon reports that the Dinky had been steamed up, and a week late reported its first trip with a pay load, the smallest log of which measured eight feet in diameter.

Engine number one was built by Baldwin in 1880, carrying builder's number 5353. Operating in city streets, hauling a "street car", she had a clerestory covering the entire engine, save the stack. The whistle projected almost two feet above the roof, but the steam dome remained out of sight. Over the years, as overhaul followed overhaul, the roof line retreated until finally she acquired the more conventional appearance of an engine with a cab.

No. 1 had an 0-4-2T wheel arrangement, with 12x16 cylinders and 36 inch drivers. Despite the 17 tons rating given in the Beacon, her builder weighed her in at 40,000 pounds. She may have lost three tons of superfluous adornment as she neared the end of her transit career.

The Dinky shuttled back and forth over limited, but ever increasing trackage which by now had stretched from the Boom into the Laguna. This was the type of running she had done in transit days, but hardly with the loads she now pulled, or pushed, over curvaceous, unballasted roadbed. She appears in many snapshots still extant in local scrapbooks, but received no mention of any spectacular event in her 23 years of service on the banks of Big River.

In the spring of 1902 she received an assist when the Company ordered, and took delivery of a spanking new Climax geared locomotive, "capable of working over rough ground." When received by sea and lightered from ship directly upriver, the Climax stood proudly in her pristine paint job, her name, "Excelsior" emblazoned under either cab window.

With her gear-drive Excelsior operated efficiently in steep gulches where grades sometimes exceeded 12%, and tracks were temporary and uneven. The Climax would bring cars from such backwoods locations to the "waterlevel" main line where the rod-driven Dinky could handily them for dumping at The Boom.
Engine 1 of Mendocino Lumber heads the first train on Big River with train at dump on Hansen Curve from the Collection of Nannie Escola.

Engine 1 of Mendocino Lumber in a later day picture with the cab cut back to expose steam dome and sand dome from the collection of Nannie Escola.
Tonnage figures for the Climax varied from Beacon story to Beacon story over her life span, ranging from 30 to 35, to 38, to 40. She was lightened to the mill on numerous occasions for periodic overhauls. No other engine figures in as many reports of overhaul.

In late March, 1921, being readied for return from such an overhaul at the mill, Excelsior slid from her lighter into the drink. She ended up about 20 feet under 40° water just off the mill. The April 9th issue, of the Beacon reports her raising by Ed Boyle "with the help of the Rice Boys."

Alden and Art Rice, grammar school pupils at the time, were commandeered because of swimming prowess. They dove and shackled cable to the sunken engine which Ed Boyle, master rigger, could use over his gin poles to connect by blocks and tackles to the mill's main engine across the sands.

With the engine raised, the Rices still had much to seek out in the murky depths, particularly the important pilot-plate which fitted between the pony truck and boiler. This massive plate, lying in mud and sand had to be upended enough for one lad to crawl under and pass a bite of cable through the center hole, all under 20 feet of freezing water.

Fifty years later Alden mainly recalls the chill. Twenty minutes was all the kids could take before high tailing to the boiler room for thawing. He says their final task was gathering up scattered tools belonging to the master mechanic whose kit had gone to the deep-six with the engine. To his credit, the mechanic gave each youngster $25, while the Company gave each $50 -- decent sums for that day and age. What the kids loved most, of course, was getting out of school.

In 1910 the Company purchased a rod engine from the Navarro Mill Company, situated at the mouth of the Navarro River about ten miles south of Mendocino. This was a Ricks & Firth, 2-4-4-ST, which was knocked down and transported by wagon to Mendocino, as were some 70 tons of rails from the same source. It is uncertain whether Molly, as she came to be called, was taken by wagon to the woods and there assembled, or if she was set up at the mill and floated up-river in one piece.

Sometime after 1915, when a snapshot shows her still with the saddle tank, Molly was relitted with a square tank on either running board. She seems to have been regarded with affection, and presumably took over most main line duties from the Dinky, which only two years previously had been taken to the mill for an attempted rejuvenation.
Mendocino Lumber Company 2 "Excelsior" posed for this view very early when company identification was still important. From the collection of Nannie Escola.

Engine 2 of the Mendocino Lumber Company in later years with a straight stack and not so much "spit and polish". From Nannie Escola collection.
Molly outlasted the rail operations in Big River woods. She was left on a stub near The Boom where the editor of The Western Railroader took her picture in July of 1940. Sometime before the mid-sixties Union Lumber Company of Fort Bragg, which had purchased the Mendocino Company in 1906, sent a bulldozer to clear a road to Molly and had her torched for scrap.

The following item appeared in the March 24, 1923 issue of the Mendocino Beacon:

Owing to the dilapidated condition of the locomotive (presumably Dinky) which has been in use for a number of years on the road between Boyle's Camp and the Boom, the Mendocino Lumber Company has purchased one of the discarded locomotives of the Union Lumber Company. This old machine was used at Fort Bragg 30 years ago and it is the intention of the Company to remodel it for use on their main line running to the Boom.

This engine, a dreary "machine" by the time she got into Big River woods, was out shopped by Baldwin in 1884. The Fort Bragg Railroad bought her second-hand in 1895, numbering her "3", which number she retained when the California Western Railroad and Navigation Company (a Union Lumber Co. subsidiary) took over the four engines of the F.B. Railroad.

Originally engine 3 had been a 2-4-2T, but by the time it reached Mendocino, it had been equipped with the 4-wheel trailing truck from engine 2 of the Fort Bragg Railroad.

Number 3 was drayed from Fort Bragg and several people recall seeing the locomotive as it was taken out Little Lake Road directly to Big River woods, a tortuous passage for a 35 ton Baldwin.

By the time she became part of the motive power up Big River any attempt at formality seems to have evaporated. Excelsior's spit-and-polish of 1902 was the high-water mark. Molly had been numbered "3", but apparently no attempt was made to re-number this new engine as "4". There seems to be no picture extant of the machine after her Fort Bragg RR days, except those which show her as a wreck.

Number 3 had vanished from the inventories of the California Western by the time the United States Government took over the railroads as of June 1, 1917. Evidently she remained on some siding and as early as 1918 was reported in the paper to have been sold to Mendocino Lumber Co. Actually, as noted in the item above, she didn't make the journey until five years later.
Mendocino Lumber train loading in the woods headed by locomotive 2 from the collection of Nannie Escola.

Log train of Mendocino Lumber passing through Boyle Camp with engine 2 showing her age from Collection of Nannie Escola.
In September of 1924, with Walter Hanson at the throttle, she had a down hill runaway. Walter joined the birds and received only a broken wrist. Put back in running order, she continued to serve until November, 1929, when, hauling a flat with hungry woodsmen bound for dinner, a burning trestle at the mouth of Little North Fork blocked their passage. Engineer George McClintock, who apparently often mixed bottle and throttle, wasn’t about to let “no burnin’ trestle stand between him and his grub” offered to run anyone hungry enough to stay with him across the bridge to the cookhouse. There being no takers, George went it alone, and the Beacon again takes up the narrative:

Locomotive No. 3 dropped through a burning trestle at Boyle’s Camp and was wrecked. As the engine approached the trestle, Chief Engineer George McClintock, who like the immortal Casey never flinched from danger, footed the whistle, rang the bell, and crashed along the trestle like a bat out of hell.

No. 3 slipped over on her left side, her wooden cab caught and burned. The Company was in the process of moving railroad equipment out of the Little North Fork, so presumably the trestle was not rebuilt. Dozers loosened rails from ties and crews went in to unbolt fishplates. In time trucks hauled out the scrap. Number 3 evidently was put to the torch where she lay, though recollections are hazy. The entire rail operation in Big River was winding down, as it really was for the sawmill operation.

Railroad camps were reported ready to start operations as per the Beacon of May 30, 1931, but no further stories appear until June 6, 1936 when the report said “Rail equipment has been moved.” Two months later “Trucks will drop logs at Laguna and rails will take them to The Doom,” the next year trucks dropped logs directly into The Boom.

Excelsior, No. 2, was evidently, like Molly, left standing when the rails were ripped up. In this case she was apparently in a shed, in Railroad Gulch. The Story goes that she was sold to a man who wanted to exhibit this species of geared locomotive. Unfortunately he left the engine too long alone. The scrap market which preceded World War II proved too tempting for some snoopers who found the Climax, unguarded, in the isolated engine house. When the owner went to claim his prize he found only an acetylene tank which he did trace the perpetrators of the dastardly deed, and saw them penned up for a spell in the Big House. However, Excelsior had been shipped to Japan for conversion into weapons for use against us during the climax of hostilities.
Engine No. 3 of Mendocino Lumber at Big River about 1919 with original saddle tank. From Nannie Escola.

Mendocino Lumber 3 abandoned near the log dump in 1939 as discovered and photographed by John Carrick.
The rails on which ran the four locomotives owned by the Mendocino Lumber Company probably never exceeded 25 miles of "main line" and spurs. Logging lines lay much temporary track in order to reach layouts where trees are currently being cut. Starting at The Boom -- and there were two "Booms" where logs were dumped, the later one being downstream from the original, and itself about five miles above the mill -- the line followed the main river. At Laguna Creek the river was bridged for a Spur into the swampy area referred to as The Laguna. Between five and ten miles of track were in use at different times in this area.

The main line continued upstream to the Little North Fork up which it turned. Apparently the rails never went further east on the main river; logs from beyond this point were floated to The Boom making use of the artificially controlled freshets described in BIG RIVER WAS DAMMED. Railroad Gulch, through which the road now runs to the Mendocino Woodlands, the Laguna, and Little North Fork seem to have constituted the sources of logs hauled by rail. Little North Fork runs comparatively level for quite a distance after it branches from the main river, and doubtless the first part of the rails running therin to tributary gulches also constituted part of the main line.

Floods constituted a major hazard to the railroad. In 1904 a flood put the line out of commission for weeks. The Boom went out and logs were "dumped anywhere." 1907 provided even more water. "Only the stack of the locomotive can be seen," reported the Beacon, and in May it was pessimistic about when the line would be ready for service.

In 1908, however, rain was insufficient to float logs or fill the dams, so the railroad was the only means of getting logs to The Boom.

The railroad was useful for more than hauling logs. In the fall of 1912 Boyle's Camp was moved, bodily, by rail from just above The Laguna into the Little North Fork. The cookhouse was cut in two and placed on cars, then hauled to its new location. In two moving days in September "several trainloads of cabins" were taken from the foot of High Chute Ridge to the new Little Northfork location of Boyle's Camp.

The bridge and piling where the railroad crossed into the Laguna had been a bottleneck for floating logs to The Boom, and in the winter of 1919-20 a new Howe Truss bridge "spanned the river by 100 feet" and the old piling was removed to clear the channel. This helped when almost 20 million feet of logs were successfully driven to The Boom in '27-8.
The woods crew loaded on a load of logs with engine 2 ready to push them back into camp from N. Escola.

The Depression played havoc with the lumber market -- as had various "panics" throughout the history of the Mendocino Lumber Company. Union Lumber had acquired MLCo in 1906, and the subsidiary had been re-incorporated in 1908 as the Mendocino Redwood Company. The mill often shut down or operated at reduced capacity for long periods. It ended production about 1937 although just before dismantling in the early forties, it reopened to cut fir from a huge log raft from Oregon that broke up just outside Mendocino Bay.

Union Lumber Company cut its losses by confining all sawing to its Fort Bragg plany. It finished demolishing the buildings it owned along the south side of Main Street, except for the Ford house. After Boise Cascade absorbed ULCo in the early sixties, the Company property along the south and west sides of Mendocino was acquired by the State Department of Parks and Recreation. All vestiges of mill, chute house, air yards have vanished, save for some ties still showing on the west side of town where lumber was stored and dried. Nothing remains in the woods save memories and some heavy piling at The Boom.

Editor's Note: Based in part on original research by the late Stanley T. Borden who provided leads for research by Don Burleson in the files of the Mendocino Beacon. Consultation and pictures most gratefully acknowledged from Nannie Escole.

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Mendocino Lumber Company mill on the flats east of town in operation looking westward across the pond. From collection of Nannie Escola

The incline up from the flats to the bluffs on the tramway from the mill in the background to the loading chute just west of the town of Mendocino. From the Collection of Nannie Escola