GRAVITY RAILROADING
ON MOUNT TAMALPAIS

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OVER THE (GUEST) EDITOR'S TRAINSHEET

It is assumed that most readers will be familiar with the book, *Crookedest Railroad in the World*, which contains the history of the rail line and trains discussed herein, plus maps and full details of the equipment. The book, published by the Trans-Anglo Division of Interurban Press, is still in print.

Acknowledgements

Railroad enthusiasts and history groups of Marin County, Mill Valley, and Mount Tamalpais are indebted to Robert W. (Bob) Smith for his remarkable document detailing the workings of the Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway. We also thank Howard Folker, Jr. and Bill Provines for additional anecdotal material. The latter worked on the railroad as a locomotive fireman. Thanks are due also to the Mill Valley Public Library (Thelma Percy, Librarian) for the use of photographs from their remarkable History Room. Thanks also to railroad fans and historians who loaned photographs. Their names appear with the appropriate captions.

TED WURM, Oakland May, 1988

(Title page photo): The MT&MW's second terminal was located deep within Muir Woods. Gravity car 11 poses at the end of the line around 1920 with a dapper executive. (*Mark Effie collection*)

THE PACIFIC COAST CHAPTER, RAILWAY & LOCOMOTIVE HISTORICAL SOCIETY...

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Gravity Railroading on Mount Tamalpais

By Robert W. Smith, Gravityman

Edited by Ted G. Wurm

Since publication of the book *Crookedest Railroad in the World* in 1983 by Trans-Anglo Books, much fascinating new material has turned up to add to the recorded history of the Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway, near San Francisco (1896-1930). Included are a number of photographs never before published. And anecdotes—Howard Folker, Jr., whose dad was a locomotive engineer on the Mountain Road, remembers how windows rattled in Blithedale Canyon when a train was leaving town. He claims that the tops of double-hung windows sometimes dropped two or three inches!

Robert W. Smith of Falls Church, Virginia, wrote to the authors soon after the 1983 publication to say how much he enjoyed the book. He had worked on the Mountain Road as a teenager in Mill Valley during 1928 and 1929. Working as a gravity car operator (Gravityman) and extra brakeman, Bob so loved the job that he had memorized and written down the entire spiel of a Gray Line tour guide, who talked loudly into a megaphone on the way up the mountain.

When asked about his experiences on the trains, Smith responded that “it was the finest job I ever had,” and proceeded to type a many-page description of his duties on the steam trains and gravity cars—the great fun, along with trials and tribulations, hard work and lasting friendships. His “Reflections and Recollections” bring the Crookedest Railroad back to life for those of us who can only imagine what it was like working and riding on the Mt. Tamalpais Railroad. The extensive material is condensed herein partly so that the truly unique operations of this most unusual rail line can be featured. Much material is of such interest that it is quoted in full, and those portions are indicated by quotation marks.

When his family moved to Mill Valley, Bob first lived close to Mill Valley station, where he became thoroughly familiar with mountain train operation. In 1927 the Smiths moved to a house in Blithedale Canyon, a half mile up the tracks from the locomotive shops and yards. Virtually every spare moment was spent around the shops and trains, sweeping out passenger cars, helping with switching, turning the motor car at Lee Street, getting an occasional ride up to the summit and down to Muir Woods with his friend, conductor John Patterson. Bob occasionally asked Superintendent Bill Thomas for a job on the railroad, but the reply was always “too young.” But in June, 1928, the Super decided that a couple of high school boys would be useful and economical additions during the busy summer months. So, on June 27th, Bob went to work on the trains at $3.00 per day (gravityman), or $2.00 for two-thirds of a day when called late. (Brakemen got $3.50; conductors $4.00; and engineers $5.00).
The primary duty of a gravityman was to operate gravity cars as they coasted
down the slopes of Mount Tamalpais, controlled by two brakes. The secondary
duties were all operating tasks that more senior employees didn’t want to do.
Early morning duties included sweeping out the necessary number of open-side
passenger cars. When this was completed and seats wiped clean, the engine
had usually drifted down from the shop to take on water and oil, couple up to
the train, and drop down to the Northwestern Pacific station across Throckmor-
ton Avenue. Three cars per train was the maximum allowed for the upward
climb. One or two of the heavier “steel” cars were placed next to the engine,
with the older wooden ones beyond.

If there were gravity cars at Mill Valley station as a result of operations on the
previous day, these would be coupled to the front of the engine for hauling up to
the tavern. A gravityman would be assigned to ride on the last of these cars as
a safety precaution in the event of a coupling break. It was very pleasant, with
a private, detached view of the train and scenery, interrupted occasionally by a
downpour of sooty black sand, when the fireman cleaned the boiler flues. When
he rode up on the train itself, Bob concentrated on the spiel given through a
megaphone by the Gray Line tour guide, Bill Osgood, memorizing it with the
hope of perhaps substituting for Osgood some day in the event of illness.

“There were always some gravity cars at the siding at Mesa Junction which
had been hauled out of Muir Woods on the final run of the preceding day, writes
Smith, “and now were to be returned to the Tavern for future operations. To
speed the pickup, the long towbar carried on the engine would be carried over
and coupled to the back of the uphill gravity car while the engine was taking
water from the Mesa tank. Brake levers of the gravities would be unlocked so
The Tavern of Tamalpais was the goal of most MT&MW trains. In this 1910 picture, the terminal yard is just out of sight behind the archway leading from the Tavern to the dance pavilion on the left. These structures were destroyed in the 1923 fire. (Ted Wurm Collection)

They’re (almost) off! Train #4 pauses for a brake test as it departs the Tavern around 1920. The senior Gravityman at the front left had two separate brake systems with two handles—and there was a gravityman in each car. Bell taps signalled brakes on or off. Rigid schedules were maintained. (Al Graves collection)
And here is the other side of the arch, in a view of the summit taken about 1900 overlooking the three-track yard. Locomotive #2, the first Heisler, appears with a former San Francisco cable car and one of the earliest open cars. Note that the locomotive is still a woodburner here. (Al Graves collection)

that they could be released quickly and the coupling connections checked. The train would move up to just beyond the upper switch for the siding. A brakeman would be waiting there, and, after throwing the switch, would jump on the pilot while the train drifted down to the gravity cars on the siding. The engine would engage the towbar, the brakeman would drop the pin, then run back up to the passenger cars to ride the head end. “It now became the duty of the gravity-man to throw the switch back to a main line position after the train had cleared the siding with the trailing gravities. Most engineers did not like to completely stop the train here, since it was on the second, sharp Double-Bow-Knot curve; if stopped, it would be difficult to get moving again. I always rode the gravity closest to the engine as the train moved out of the siding, jumping off at the switch and setting every muscle at the ready to throw this particularly recalcitrant switch as soon as the final car passed. I would raise the handle and throw every ounce of my wholly inadequate 115 pounds into what I hoped would be a quick snap and turn and lock. Often several re-throws would be necessary before I could lock the switch. “Meanwhile, the train would continue its climb around the curve, the engineer annoyed and impatient at the ineptness of the junior crewman. Frantically, I would give chase, often for thirty or forty yards, until I could catch the tail-end gravity and climb aboard. Invariably, as I struggled to catch my breath, in a state of near-exhaustion and collapse, I would be deluged with a cloud of soot and sand as the fireman cleaned out engine flues for better steaming up the final grades. “About twenty minutes after leaving Mesa, passing West Point Inn on the way, our train would arrive at Tamalpais Tavern. Our first task was to unload the freight, which consisted of crates of fresh vegetables, meats, and other food supplies, and bundles of magazines and newspapers. The engine would always
Ready to leave the Tavern on a late summer afternoon in the 1920s, train #4 will pick up gravity passengers at Mesa Station. Closed car #27 is behind Shay #5. The engine is poised on the crest of the downgrade, almost under the archway. (Al Graves collection)

stop near the lower end of the passenger platform, leaving gravity cars below the siding switch. A long steel cable was substituted for the engine’s towbar. Then, once unloading was completed, as the engine backed up on the main track into the storage yards beyond the Tavern, the gravities would be pulled onto the adjacent siding.

Now it was lunchtime in the kitchen area for train crew members, followed by a siesta in one of the passenger cars while waiting for the 12:40 run back to Mill Valley. Bob Smith tells us that gravitymen were kept busy sweeping out an appropriate number of cars. To lessen friction on the curves and eliminate squealing wheels, each gravity had a water tank up front; these had to be checked to be sure they’d been filled at Mesa or the Woods. As soon as the steam train departed, gravities were pushed down to the lower end of the Tavern passenger platform, ready for a 1:40 departure to Muir Woods. A gravity train consisted of four cars or less, each with a gravityman aboard at the right front seat to operate brakes. Each man had two brake levers, operating independent sets of brakes for safety, either being capable of stopping a car on the steepest grade. The left-hand lever was fitted with a ratchet. Both could be pulled back and secured by a steel bar, which could be fixed and fastened with a switch lock.

Right at 1:40 the train would start rolling downgrade under power of gravity. Almost immediately the conductor in the front car would signal a brake test, stamping on his signal bell and raising his hand. Each gravityman would respond by pulling back on both levers, and the train would come to a stop. Then, with a double clang, the conductor would signal departure—and down they’d go, at twelve miles an hour, past Pievile Curve, then Hummingbird
A typical gravity car is pictured at the summit on January 20, 1918. It had a nominal capacity of thirty (six to a bench seat), but usually operated with just 25 passengers for more comfort. Note the two brake handles on the far side of the front seat. The brakes were locked with a switch lock when standing. (Ted Wurm Collection)

A string of empty gravities on the siding at Mesa Station (gravity trains this long were never operated). The train on the way up will drop into the siding, pick up the gravity cars behind (downhill from) the engine, and proceed four miles to the summit. (Al Graves collection)
Bill Osgood, longtime Gray Line tour guide, hawks photo postcards at the Mesa station enroute to Summit; the passengers all face forward while the Shay backs up, pushing its cars. This picture was taken in 1928 by Bob Smith, while he waited to couple his gravity cars to the front of the engine and be hauled back up.

A train of gravities is stopped at the Mesa water tank on the Double Bowknot around 1910. Gravity trains were shown on the employee timetables like all other trains, and had to obey the same operating rules. This train will meet another up-bound train beyond the switch. Above the forward car can be seen another train, powered by a Shay. *(Al Graves collection)*
Canyon. "On to West Point Inn," in the words of Bob Smith, "where, if the train was flagged to pick up passengers, a stop could be made only at the lowest end of the station platform beyond the curve. The curve radius was so short that, if the gravities stopped on the curve, it would be impossible to start them again without much agonized pushing.

Fern Canyon was both long and sharp, while the grade seemed almost flat. Gravity brakes had to be fully released to coast past this level spot. Occasionally, if there were too many draggy, slow cars like No. 17, the train would eventually slow and stall. (Bill Provines, who worked on the Tamalpais Railroad as a locomotive fireman and occasional gravityman, wrote that "In Fern Canyon there was a water tank where the fireman had to top off the locomotive's tank, if we had the maximum permitted train of three coaches. Three coaches required more steam [power], so additional water was required. There was a short, level space at the water tank where the train would stop. When leaving the top of the mountain with a gravity train, we always told the passengers that we would have to exceed our twelve-mile-an-hour speed limit to get over this [and another] flat spot. Beyond the curve, there was plenty of gravity, but now and then we didn't quite coast to the steeper area."

The "Booster," an early self-propelled sightseeing railcar is framed in the afternoon sun around 1908 by the interestingly-shingled archway at Tamalpais Tavern. This car was the MT&MW's first motor car, operating on distillate fuel. The terminal yard, out of sight behind the car, was on level ground. (Al Graves collection)
At right, two sections stop in 1915 for the obligatory picture at the Double Bowknot. On Sundays, trains ran five minutes apart! (Wurm collection) At center, a descending train (with passengers facing the engine) is pictured around 1925. The standing man in uniform at the far left is the tour guide. (Norman Holmes collection) At the bottom, an uphill train at Mesa around 1915 carries the signboard of a charter group. The tank car and gravities in the siding will be picked up and pulled behind the “front” of Shay #4. (Ted Wurm Collection)
A pair of commercial portraits taken of tourists and their trains: above, it's August 10, 1915, and a small group freezes for T. C. Wohlsbruck's camera at the Double Bowknot. Behind Shay #7 and the two cars are two more trains, one of them headed downhill and the other taking water enroute to the summit. (Ted Wurm Collection)
On October 24, 1918, another group poses for its panoramic photo on the way up. The twin water tanks at Mesa station (over the “L” in the coach name board), are on the next level of the Double Bowknot. Leisure attire had not yet been invented. (Harre Demoro collection)
We're at the Mill Valley engine house on April 26, 1908, as the crew assembles newly-arrived Shay #7; that's the main drive crankshaft down in front. This is one of few pictures which illustrate the engine facilities. The engine arrived facing the wrong way, and had to be run up to Bowknot to be turned on the wye there before entering service. The same thing happened when it was later returned from lease by the Hetch Hetchy. (Howard Folker)

Just uphill from the Mill Valley station in 1915, homebuilt open/closed coach #20 sits on a siding. In front of the car at the left is the underground oil fuel tank and two small steam engines to drive the pumps. (Vernon Sappers collection)
Wooden coaches 20 and 22 at Mill Valley around 1910, almost in the shade of the shop doorway. Many of the MT&MW cars were built right here. Note the lack of automatic couplers. (Howard Folker)

The Scenic Road's carbuilding facility at the small shop area in Mill Valley around 1920 is completing two new gravity cars. Fabrication was almost exclusively in wood. (Howard Folker)
The West Point Inn, altitude 2000, was almost surrounded by tracks, going downhill on left and uphill at right. The outer rail was 32 feet longer than the inner; even with this obvious grade, gravity trains would stop here unless momentum was maintained. This is the only surviving structure that once belonged to the MT&MW. That’s the Bolinas stage barn at the left. (Ted Wurm Collection)

Construction work on the Muir Woods Branch circa 1910 finds a work crew shoveling in Pipeline Cut. The wide-swinging drawbar on the flat car is reminiscent of street railroad practice; there were no automatic couplers on freight equipment, either. (Howard Folkner)

We return now to Smith’s narration: “Then, aided by a helpful passenger or two, it would be necessary to uncouple the cars and, one at a time, push them on a hundred feet or so to the steeper grade below. At the Mesa [Bowknot], gravity trains headed for Muir Woods always moved through the station and stopped below the Mill Valley junction switch. The up train from town would also stop just below the switch so passengers could change trains across a transfer platform.” The Muir Woods Branch started with a slow, flat curve, then descended quickly to the steep, sharp curve at lower Fern Canyon. There was easy sailing from there to the curve at Old Inn, where the combination of a sharp curve and a flat grade required careful operations to avoid stalling the train. The final descent to New Inn was steep; both brake levers were always pulled back to the full as the train eased down the final grade to the station platform.

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Gravity train movements down the main line into Mill Valley were not very frequent in 1928-29, according to Gravityman Smith. The three-mile stretch between Mesa and Lee Street was relatively easy running. “But below Lee, the grade flattened a little and there were about eight streets crossing the line. After passing the railway shops, the grade steepened through the yards. Brakes had to be completely released to maintain speed. It was essential to stamp furiously on the car bell clanger before each crossing. Fortunately, there were few autos in Blithedale Canyon in the late 1920s. “If the train was a scheduled operation, the gravity car conductor was required to call the railway office before leaving Lee Street. Then, as the car or train of gravities passed Lovell Avenue in Mill Valley, it would signal its arrival with especially loud and continuous bell clanging. One of the office employees would emerge from headquarters adjoining the track on Throckmorton Avenue and flag the train across the main Mill Valley street. Labor Day 1928 brought big crowds to the trains, the last big day of the season. Bob Smith turned out to be the only crewman at the Tavern available to run a 4:40 Extra gravity car down to Mill Valley. His first solo run all the way down; Bob received an extra psychic bonus as well. Bill Cannons, the MT&MW’s General Manager, was the only person on duty at the office. “I can remember no greater feeling of glory,” wrote Bob, “than the experience of clanging my car bell and rolling grandly across Throckmorton Avenue to the NWP station, while being protected by the waving flag of the General Manager.”

There’s a lot to be said in favor of gravity operation when an extra train is unexpectedly needed in a hurry. On St. Patrick’s Day, 1929, four passengers were left behind when the last train departed from Tamalpais Tavern. A hurried call to West Point caught the train—and the junior crewman, Bob, was ordered to walk the two miles back up to the Tavern and deliver the passengers to Mill Valley in a gravity car. He made the climb in a half-hour and found the car loaded and waiting, and it was one of the “good” cars. No problems getting past Fern Canyon, and Smith brought his car into Mill Valley only twenty-five minutes behind the regular train.

A rare picture of Shay #1 (built new in 1900 and sold in 1904) laying over at Summit in 1900, when it was still lettered for the Mill Valley & Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway, and had yet to be converted to oil fuel. (Mill Valley Public Library)
Commuters from outlying neighborhoods of Mill Valley rode the MT&MW from Lee Street Station for a 5-cent fare. Original power was side-tank Porter 0-4-0 #6, an eighteen-tonner delivered in 1906. It was too expensive to operate, however, and was replaced by a Kissel motor car. The nickel fare didn’t last! (Howard Folker) At right is a rear view (circa 1920) of motor #3 on a local. The car is ready to coast a mile down to Mill Valley station. (Howard Folker) Below, it’s afternoon during the early twenties at Mill Valley; motor #3 is leaving on a commuter run to Lee Street; it could be turned on a small turntable there. (C. L. Mason: Holmes collection)
On the morning of a busy summer Sunday in 1915, three Shays (#3, 7, and 4) are lined up at the Corte Madera Avenue siding in Mill Valley, ready to pick up cars for three sections of the 10:40 train. Engineer Howard Folker is responsible for this picture.

Ready to leave the Mill Valley station with a full load, steel car #30 leads a two-car train being pushed by Shay #8 running backward. The Company owned only three steel cars, #28-30; when mixed in consist with wood cars, steel equipment was kept closest to the engine. (Ted Wurm Collection)
Not all days and moments were so rewarding. "Probably the least pleasant part of my job on the Mountain Railroad was the requirement for the junior gravitymen to walk back out of Muir Woods to Mesa Station for further assignment after operating one of the morning gravity trains down to the Inn. For example, passengers on a Sunday or holiday going directly from Mill Valley to the Woods would change to a gravity at the Mesa, departing at 10:10 and arriving at the Woods at 10:30. It was just possible for a very briskly walking junior crewman to hike three miles back to Mesa by 11:10 and operate another gravity into the Woods, if necessary. Appropriate instructions were telephoned to Muir Inn from the Superintendent’s office in Mill Valley. After lunch in the Woods, all gravitymen were required to hike to Mesa to meet the 1:40 train out of Mill Valley, in order to be available for other assignments in the afternoon. Days when double walk-outs were ordered, and mountainside temperatures were in the high eighties, required a continuing positive attitude toward the job."

In 1929, passenger loads on the Crookedest Railroad declined drastically. The summer schedule was cut back, and the regular 9:40 and 11:40 Sunday trains from prior years were now regarded as extras. Only the regular 10:40 crew was usually shown: Jake Johnson, engineer; Jules Aubuchon, fireman; John Patterson, conductor; Bert Jones, brakeman. Gravitymen weren’t important enough to list. There were only a few extra trains as summer drew to a close after the disastrous fire of July 2. Bob remembered that passenger service was suspended for only a few days, as an augmented section gang repaired the track where ties had been burned out. Burned Shay 7 was re-railed and towed back to

Water for the summit tavern was delivered in four-wheel tank cars on regular trains. Shay #4, built for the MV&MT by Lima in 1903, is pictured around 1925 providing some tender water, as well. (C. L. Mason: Holmes collection)
A hiker at Muir Woods in 1912 examines the cab of Shay #3 under the watchful eye of the fireman. In the background is the first Muir Inn; gravity cars later rolled past here on the way to the second Muir Inn. Note the “porcupine” feedwater heater (old flues inside enlarged stack). (Al Graves collection)

At the Summit around 1920, the camera catches a glimpse of a water car and a gravity car bracketing Shay 5. The cable in the foreground was for drawing strings of gravities into the track paralleling the locomotive. Cars and locomotives were kept glistening in maroon paint. (Lowell Styles)
the shops to be stored on the "hole track" looking incredibly sad. "The Railway ran special advertisements in the San Francisco papers announcing that the best views of the destruction in Mill Valley could be obtained from mountain trains. There was a short burst of traffic from curious sightseers, but the ride through the burned area on Summit Ridge was dismal at best. An unpleasant and depressing odor of smoke and ash hung over the area for weeks. I was called steadily for operating duties until August 14, 1929, when I resigned to enroll at the University in Berkeley. It was a sad moment for me when I said farewell to that period of pleasantly rewarding experience. It was sadder still the following year when Mr. Thomas wrote me that operations had been suspended; the railway would be abandoned; and there would be no more jobs for anybody, anymore."

A reunion at the Mill Valley Library in 1987 brings together two old-timers from the "Crookedest Railroad:" at left is Bill Provines, a summer-season fireman while a student at U.C. Berkeley. On the right is Bob Smith, whose memories provided the substance of this issue. Bob worked weekends and summers as a gravityman and brakeman. (Ted Wurm)
**MT. TAMALPAIS**

**DO NOT FAIL TO TAKE THIS TRIP**

**MOUNTAIN RAILROADS**

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"The Crookedest Railroad in the World"

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**MOUNTAIN RAILROADS**

LENGTH OF DIFFERENT ROADS AND FARE CHARGED

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BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Seivers, Waldemar. "Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railroad," Western Railroader; April, 1940 (Reprinted in March, 1951; Issue #136).


State Belt Follow-up:

A typesetting error caused the loss of the builder's number for SB's Alco diesel #20; it was #70203.

Add to our previous bibliography of the State Belt another magazine article, this one appearing in the members' magazine of the Automobile Club of Southern California:


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