

The Crookedest Railroad

Early Travel to Muir Woods

National Park Service
U. S. Department of Interior
Muir Woods National Monument



Visiting a Redwood Forest

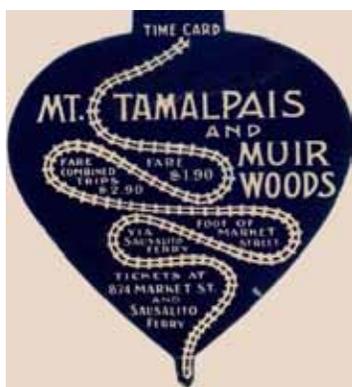
Can you recall the excitement of leaving home on vacation for a place you had never been? For over 100 years people from all over the world have traversed winding mountain roads to visit the ancient redwoods at Muir Woods National Monument. In the park's early years visitors rode up the rugged slopes of Mount Tamalpais on the "Crookedest Railroad in the World" to reach the iconic redwoods.

The Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway

During its time a trip on the Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railroad was a favorite city getaway for San Franciscans. The railway was an immediate success when it opened for business in 1896 and was dubbed by locals as the "Crookedest Railroad in the World" because of its 281 curves in just over eight miles of track, which were depicted in the company's logo, seen left.

Imagine the feeling of excitement and anticipation people must have felt as they ferried across the bay to Sausalito. At the nearby Mill Valley train depot a sleek Heisler or Shay steam engine's

whistle signaled the beginning of the train ride to the top of Mount Tamalpais. Passengers breathed the fresh mountain air from open cars as the train climbed to an elevation of 2,500 feet at a speed of 10 miles per hour. At the summit people marveled at views of the entire San Francisco Bay Area. Locomotives were positioned on the downhill end of the train and pushed the passenger cars uphill, allowing for unobstructed vistas. Watching the engines push from below was an added spectacle for riders, who could see the train's gears and engineer at work.



A National Monument Proclaimed

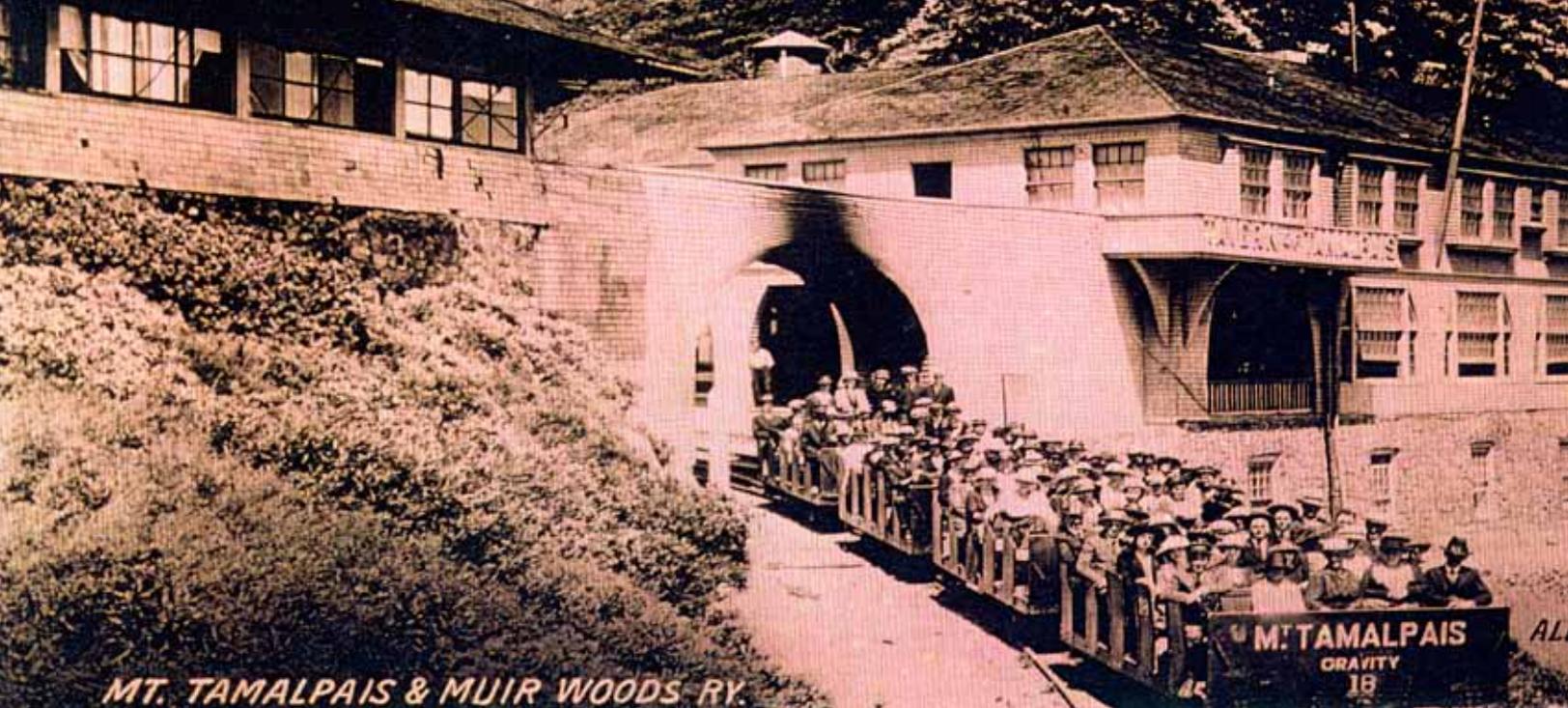
A movement to establish a national park on Mount Tamalpais failed in the early 1900s. Involved with the effort was local businessman William Kent. Kent and his wife, Elizabeth Thatcher, purchased land all over the mountain to protect it from development. In 1905, the Kents bought one of the few remaining forests of coastal redwood trees in the Bay Area. The Kents intended the forest to be a public park and to bring visitors out they invested in a two and a half mile spur to connect their canyon with the railway's main line.

Following the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, a water development company, North Coast Water, attempted a take over of the Kents' property to acquire lumber for reconstruction efforts. Kent thwarted the company's plan by gifting 295 acres of the forest to the United States government to be protected as a national monument. At Kent's request, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the forest Muir Woods National Monument, in honor of admired naturalist John Muir.

William Kent, benefactor of Muir Woods.



Visitors riding a gravity car to Muir Woods



Innovation Inspired

Proclamation of a national monument near a major urban area attracted visitors from places far and near. The Mount Tamalpais and Muir Woods Scenic Railway did not have enough engines in operation to transport all people wanting to visit the newly established park, so master mechanic Bill Thomas developed the railway's signature innovation – the gravity car.

A Silent Glide Into the Forest

How did you feel the first time you rode a roller coaster? For the riders of the gravity car the twelve-mile an hour ride down the southern face of Mount Tamalpais was an exhilarating ride. Accounts describe the experience as a silent glide into the forest. Scenic views revealed themselves with each turn of the track. Glimpses of wildlife came as deer and birds scattered away from the tracks ahead. Locals called it "The Longest Roller Coaster Ride in the World" and it was advertised as being "not for the faint at heart." Brakemen at the front and back of the chain of cars ensured a safe and memorable ride. For the return trip the cars were pulled back to the mountain's summit by a locomotive running in reverse.

The terminus of the Muir Woods line was located near the area now known as Camp Alice Eastwood. From this point park visitors explored the redwoods or settled in for their stay at the Muir Woods Inn. In 1913 the inn burned to the ground, but a new inn with the same amenities was later built nearby. The original inn's foundations can still be seen today at Camp Eastwood, near the Fern Creek trailhead.

The railroad's popularity reached its zenith in 1915, when San Francisco hosted the Panama-Pacific Exhibition. In this year nearly 1000 people from all over the world rode the scenic railroad and gravity cars to visit Muir Woods National Monument every single day.

The End of an Era

Ridership declined in later years. By 1920, automobiles could drive to the mountain summit on twisty roads. A fire on Mount Tamalpais in 1929 left many of the rail ties damaged or destroyed. Rail managers lost hope for profitability and abandoned reconstruction efforts. The last train traveled up the mountain on October 31, 1929. Tracks were pulled up in 1930, signaling the end of travel to Muir Woods on the Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway.

People today still experience the same sense of excitement at the prospect of getting out of the city and coming to Mount Tamalpais for exploration and recreation. Hikers and bicyclists now enjoy the Old Railroad Grade and Gravity Car Road as popular paths. Restored gravity cars are on display at the Gravity Car Barn at the summit of Mount Tamalpais and at Old Mill Park in Mill Valley. A locomotive from the old rail line rests at the entrance to the Pacific Lumber mill in Scotia, California. These relics are all that remain of the era of railroad travel to Muir Woods. Visitors today may not experience an exciting ride on a gravity car as they enter the forest, but traversing mountain roads to admire the majesty of redwood trees will always be a part of visiting Muir Woods National Monument.



Automobiles parked in what is now the main parking lot (c. 1933).