

Railroad History of Modesto

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Chinese Workers and the San Joaquin Valley Railroad



Bancroft's New Map of Central California, 1871, when Modesto was the end of the line.

After they completed the transcontinental railroad in May 1869, the crews of Chinese laborers began work on the Western Pacific line from Sacramento to the Oakland Wharf. That was completed in November 1869. Then the crews of laborers were moved back and forth, working alternately on the California and Oregon Railroad in the Sacramento Valley and the San Joaquin Valley Railroad. These men who did the major share of work building the rail line from Wilson's Station, now called Lathrop, to Modesto in 1870.

A map of the route of the San Joaquin Valley Railroad was first mentioned in a letter from Edwin Crocker to Collis Huntington on February 3, 1868 (1). In the letter, he says that the railroad had been secretly organized to build a line through the San Joaquin Valley to the Kern River. Two days later, the railroad was incorporated (2).

By June 1869, the survey of the route was completed (3) and in November 1869, surveys for the bridges over the Stanislaus and Tuolumne rivers were underway (4). The January 21, 1870, *Sacramento Daily Union* reported that more than 800 Chinese laborers were working on the San Joaquin Valley Railroad near Wilson's Station. They were supervised by James Strobridge, Superintendent of Construction. Strobridge had world-wide fame for supervising the Central Pacific Railroad portion of the transcontinental railroad. By February 18, the Chinese crews had reached the Stanislaus River near where Ripon is today (5). Strobridge's Camp, as the crews were called, then moved to work on the California and Oregon Railroad (6). For their back-breaking efforts, the *Tuolumne City News* of June 17, 1870, reported that the Chinese workers were paid twenty-one dollars a month and they had to provide for their own meals. →

Chinese Workers, continued:

On August 22, 1870, the San Joaquin Valley Railroad and the California and Oregon Railroad merged into the Central Pacific Railroad Company (7). Soon after, on September 6, 1870, the *Marysville Daily Appeal* reported that a special train of 35 cars under conductor and engineer William Sippy had left the California and Oregon line to resume work on the San Joaquin Valley line. The *Tuolumne City News* of September 16, 1870, reported that a crew of 100 Chinese workers had started grading on the south side of the Stanislaus River.

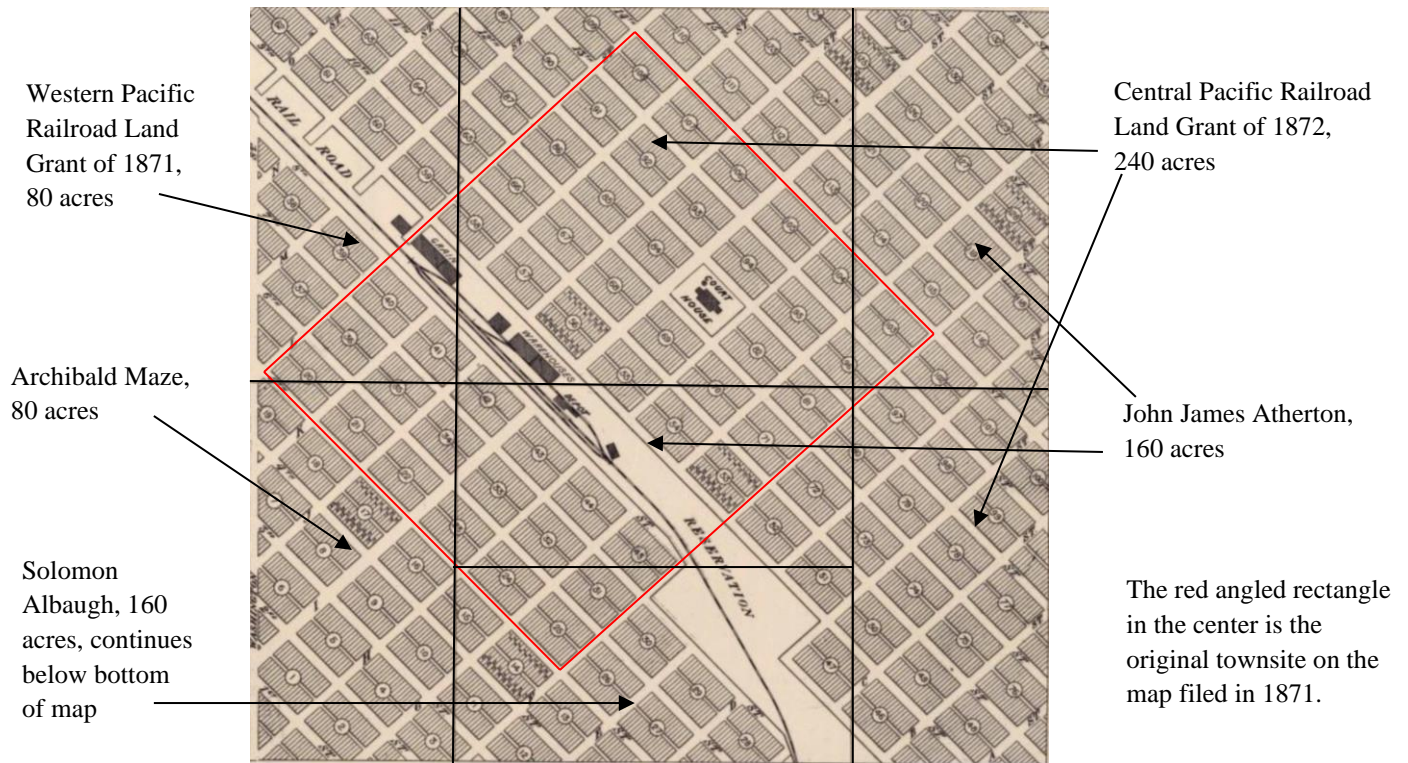
About October 10th, the first train crossed the bridge over the Stanislaus River and by the 20th the rail line was completed to a point about five miles south of the river. It was on that day that Mr. Philipps received the first rail shipment to Stanislaus County; “several tons of general merchandise, principally groceries,” shipped to the end of the rail line and then hauled by wagon to Tuolumne City (8). On October 28, the *Tuolumne City News* reported that on the 27th, the first trainload of wheat was shipped from the town of Ralston (Modesto) directly to Oakland. By October 28th, the Chinese crews moved back to working on the California and Oregon line (8). Their work of building the railroad to the site of Modesto was done.

Learn more about the Chinese railroad workers at <https://modestoartmuseum.org/chinese-workers-built-the-railroad-to-modesto/>

1. Crocker to Huntington, February 3, 1868, Series I, Box 1, Huntington Papers, Bird Library, Syracuse University
2. *Sacramento Daily Union*, volume 34, #5260, February 6, 1868, page 2, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18680206&e>
3. *Daily Alta*, volume 21, #7025, June 13, 1869, page 2, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DAC18690613.2.34.4&e>
4. *Sacramento Daily Union*, volume 38, #5820, November 22, 1869, page 2, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18691122.2.10&srpos=6&e>
5. *Stockton Independent*, volume 18, #16, February 18, 1870, page 3, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDI18700218.2.13&srpos=12&e>
6. *Sacramento Daily Union*, volume 38, #5917, March 15, 1870, page 3, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18700315.2.16&srpos=1&e>
7. *To the Bond Holders of the Central and Western Pacific Railroad Companies*, January 2, 1871, page 8, accessed May 8, 2020. [http://cpr.org/Museum/Books/I ACCEPT the User Agreement/Digitized by Google/Bondholders CPRR-WPRR_1871.pdf](http://cpr.org/Museum/Books/I%20ACCEPT%20the%20User%20Agreement/Digitized%20by%20Google/Bondholders_CPRR-WPRR_1871.pdf)
8. *Marysville Daily Appeal*, volume 22, #93, October 30, 1870, page 3, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=MDA18701030.2.14&srpos=5&e>



Modesto - 1870 Boomtown



Patchwork of land parcels that made up the Modesto townsite.

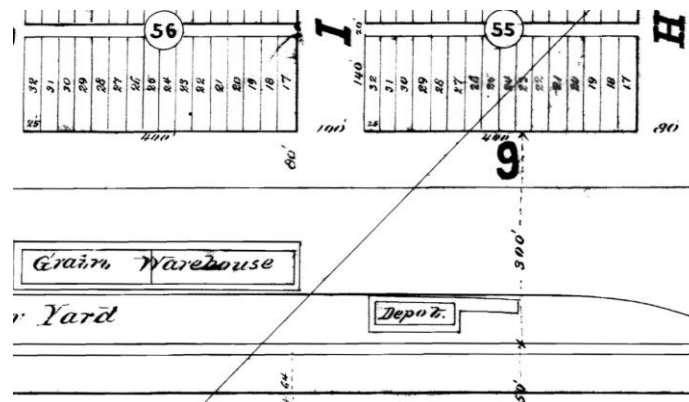
At this point, we may never know why the Central Pacific Railroad chose the site they did for Modesto. Perhaps it was enough incentive that the townsite included land it expected to acquire through two federal railroad land grants (1). About October 10, 1870, the railroad's agent, the Contract and Finance Company, purchased 400 acres adjoining those land grants (2): 80 acres from Archibald Maze, 160 acres from John Atherton, and 160 acres from Solomon Albaugh. However, the map they filed with the county of the first townsite on May 3, 1871, was much smaller, about 230 acres. It covered the area from 5th to 14th streets and from F to L streets; half from the land grants and half from parts of the properties purchased from Maze, Atherton, and Albaugh.

If you had read newspapers from mid-October to mid-November 1870, you would have been confused about the name of the town. Some called it Ralston, some called it Modesto, some called it both. All sources agree that the town was originally named Ralston in honor of William Ralston, co-founder of the Bank of California and the man who arranged financing for the San Joaquin Valley line. All sources agree that Ralston refused the honor. Some newspapers reported the change was made to acknowledge what was thought to be Ralston's modesty. Other newspapers berated Ralston and the railroad owners, mocking their appeal to modesty in naming the town (3). Ralston had allowed Ralston, New Mexico, to be named for him earlier in 1870. There is a bigger story here waiting to be researched and told. →

Confusion over the name did not delay the development of the town. Even before the line was completed to Modesto, residents of Tuolumne City and Paradise had arranged to have their houses and commercial buildings moved to the new town (4). Many hired Hiram Fisher of Stockton to do the job. (5) According to the *Tuolumne City News*, the first building, a hotel kitchen (6), made the journey on October 29. Over the next month, dozens of buildings were moved to Modesto and by mid-December the boom town had more than 75 buildings (7). Regular railroad passenger service began on November 8 (8). The *Tuolumne City News* moved to Modesto and became the *Stanislaus County Weekly News* with the first issue dated December 2, 1870.

The *Stanislaus County Weekly News* reported on December 16, "The depot buildings of the R.R. Company, now nearly completed, are larger and more commodious than any outside of San Francisco and Sacramento, which shows that a heavy business is anticipated at this place" (9). The post office was opened by December 23 (10). By the end of 1870, there were hotels, markets, saloons, stables, and a restaurant, with more opening every day. Modesto was booming.

1. The Central Pacific Railroad received the land grants of the Western Pacific Railroad after it acquired the Western Pacific on June 23, 1870.
2. *Tuolumne City News*, October 14, 1870, page 2
3. "We are informed that the new railroad town near the crossing of the Tuolumne river is to be called Modesto. It is safe to assert that the Central Pacific Company, in naming the town have made the nearest approach to "modesty" of which they are capable." *Stockton Independent*, Vol. 19, Number 74, October 25, 1870. In reference to Ashmore being named for Nelson Ashmore, "Ralston declined the honor of having his name affixed to what is now Modesto. We are happy to know that Colonel Nelson Ashmore has no such weakness." *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, January 20, 1871, page 1. "The town was named in derision, but it has made the name so flippantly given famous throughout the state." *San Francisco Examiner*, April 26, 1890, page 9
4. *Sacramento Daily Union*, September 29, 1870, Volume 40, Number 6082
5. *Stockton Daily Evening Herald*, December 1, 1870 page 3
6. *Tuolumne City News*, November 4, 1870, page 2
7. Pacific Coast Brevities, *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 22, 1870, page 4
8. B. F. Tuttle, *Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Transportation for the Years Ending December 31, 1877 and 1878*, (Sacramento, State Printing, 1879), page 75. Accessed 29 July 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?id=RAZFAQAAMAAJ>)
9. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, 16 December 1870, page 2
10. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, December 23, 1870, page 2



Detail of the Modesto townsite map filed in Stanislaus County by the Central Pacific Railroad on May 3, 1871, showing site of depot. (Stanislaus County Surveyor's Office)

Central and Southern Pacific Depots in Modesto 1870 to 1915

The San Joaquin Valley line of the Central Pacific Railroad reached the future site of Modesto, California, in October 1870, and scheduled service began on November 8, 1870¹. First mention of a Central Pacific Railroad depot in Modesto was in December 1870.² By the end of the year, in a local newspaper, Modesto businesses were referring to their location in reference to the depot (“opposite depot” or “west of depot”).

In his 1921 history of the county, George Tinkham described the building as “the little red depot.”³ In a newspaper article when the depot burned on August 23, 1884, mention is made of large water tanks on the roof. Along with the depot, the railroad built other structures including a water tank that was 16 feet deep, 24 feet in diameter, and held more than 50,000 gallons; a windmill on a 50-foot tower;⁴ a turntable;⁵ a stock corral; and grain warehouses.

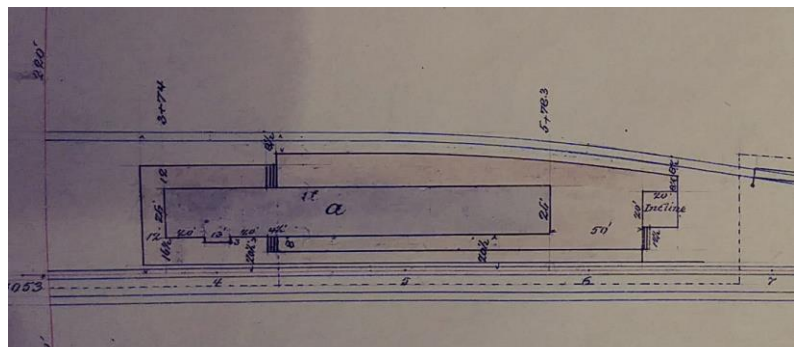
The railroad began construction of a new depot almost immediately after the old one burned. The *Stanislaus County Weekly News* reported on September 12, 1884, “The Railroad Company are building their depot at this place. It will be built on the site of the former building. It will be some fifty feet longer than the old one and ten feet narrower, thus giving more platform room,” and on November 14, 1884, “The new depot at this place, though not an imposing nor very costly structure, is an improvement upon the old one.” “The attaches of the railroad company at this place are now located in the new depot. They are an obliging and accommodating set of officers. Their new quarters are much more conveniently arranged, as well as more comfortable.” The depot was completed in October 1884⁶ at a cost of \$6,549⁷.→



Looking southwest on I Street from 9th toward 8th Street
First Central Pacific Railroad depot on the left, about 1880
(City of Modesto, McHenry Museum Archive)



Photo of the 1884 depot taken between 1886 and 1891.
(City of Modesto, McHenry Museum Archive)



Detail of the Modesto depot, c. 1885 Southern Pacific Railroad Map,
Station plans Lathrop to Yuma and Goshen Division, pages 3-4
 (California State Railroad Museum Archive, 96 ID 23896)



View of the west side of the depot looking south across I Street toward 9th (Front) Street. Photo was taken between 1898 and 1903. (*City of Modesto, McHenry Museum Archive*)

The inside was divided into four areas: a waiting room, ticket office, baggage room, and the largest, the freight room. An elevated platform surrounded the freight room. The depot was unusual because it had a hipped roof. The building did not change much over the years. After a separate passenger depot was built in 1915, the 1884 building became exclusively for freight. It was demolished in 1982 after a fire.

There are other important railroads in Modesto's history. The Tidewater Southern Railroad, incorporated in 1910, eventually provided service from Hilmar and Turlock to Stockton via Modesto. It went out of existence in 1986. The Modesto & Empire Traction Company was founded in 1911, connecting Modesto with the Santa Fe line in Empire. The company is still in operation. There was briefly, in 1909, the Modesto Empire Railroad.

1. Tuttle, B. F., *Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Transportation for the Years Ending December 31, 1877 and 1878*, Sacramento, State Printing, 1879, page 75. Accessed 29 January 2019, <https://books.google.com/books?id=RAZFAQAA MAAJ>
2. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, December 16, 1870, page 2, Newspapers.com
3. Tinkham, George Henry, *History of Stanislaus County*, Historic Record Company, 1921, 158
4. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, March 10, 1871, Newspapers.com
5. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, February 10, 1871, page 2, Newspapers.com
6. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, November 14, 1884, page 3
7. *Annual Report of the Central Pacific Railroad for the Year Ending December 31, 1884*, page 37, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Report_of_the_Directors_to_the_Stockhold/oD4KAAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=Modesto

The Southern Pacific Depot of 1915



Illustration by Kevin Miller

On March 7, 1914, the Modesto Chamber of Commerce filed a complaint with the California Railroad Commission claiming that the depot in the city was “insufficient for the use of the public and the transaction of the business of the Southern Pacific Company; and that it is necessary for the public convenience and for the transaction of business that a larger depot be constructed.” Railroad Commissioner Alex Gordon came to Modesto for the hearing on April 21, 1914. The commission decided in favor of the city and ordered the railroad to build a new depot costing no less than \$15,000.

Though the railroad commission’s decision was in May 1914, it was more than a year before construction started in part because the people of Modesto could not decide on a site for the new depot and in part because the mayor and city council were not able to move the project forward. In 1915, it took two votes of the electorate of the city to decide to close J Street and place the depot where it is today.

The ruling suggested a Mission style for the design of the depot. Mission Revival was popular in California at that time, and other structures in the style were being built in Modesto. The railroad relied on its own architect and assistant chief engineer John Quincy Barlow and his team to design the Mission Revival style depot. The Modesto depot is a near twin of the depot in Porterville. The depots are so similar that the railroad used photographs and drawings of the Porterville depot in its publicity for the Modesto depot.

Barlow announced on July 9, that the railroad had hired George A. Bos, a well-known San Francisco civil engineer and contractor to build the depot. The contract price was \$9,720, significantly less than the mandated minimum of \$15,000. Construction began Monday, July 12, 1915. Though the building was finished, the opening was delayed several weeks because furniture for the waiting rooms was delayed. The depot opened for service at 4 pm, December 11, 1915.

The building is best seen from the trackside, considered the front of the depot. The two prominent features greeting arriving passengers are the arch colonnade and the twin towers. In 1915, when passengers entered the building, they saw panels of photographs of Mt. Shasta, Lake Tahoe, the Mariposa grove of big trees, and Yosemite National Park.

The completed depot sat in the middle of the block with no landscaping, walkways, or lighting between it and the adjacent streets. The citizens of Modesto and the railroad battled over what to do with the depot landscaping for the next 12 years. It was 1928 when the city and the railroad reached an agreement to landscape part of the blocks and provide paved areas for automobile parking. Rail passengers used the depot until 1971 when Southern Pacific ended service to Modesto.

Dating an Old Modesto Railroad Photo



To date an old photograph like the one above, the Modesto Art Museum uses clues provided by the photograph itself. In this photograph, the tower of the Bank of Modesto, completed in 1893, is visible, but the 1915 depot has not yet been built, so the photo was taken after 1893 and before 1915. The depot park, completed by January 1904, is in place, but the trees are small. One of the warehouses in the distance is marked Lacher and Kahn, and they went bankrupt in 1906. This narrows the date range to sometime between January 1904 and about 1906, but we need to be careful here, because the sign on the warehouse may not have been changed for years. The water tank is on the west side of the tracks, and we know from a newspaper article that it was torn down in October 1910.

The locomotive at bottom left is the #1358, obtained by Southern Pacific from the Oregon and California Railroad. The 1358 was scrapped in January 1924. It was an eight-wheel, class E-11, 4-4-0, Baldwin 6669, built in 1883. (Locomotives of SP Company, *The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin*, August 1941, page 59). No help from this clue.

From July 1904 to January 1905, the Los Angeles Express and a freight train both left Modesto at 2:56 pm going north. (*Stanislaus County Weekly News*, August 26, 1904, page 2) In this photo, it appears two trains are leaving at the same time going north, a freight train and a passenger train. The shadows indicate afternoon and dark leaves on the trees indicate before December. When all these clues are taken into consideration, we can estimate that the photo was taken after January 1904 and before October 1910, and there is good reason to think it was taken about 2:56 pm on a day between July and December 1904.

The Monster Man-Eating Shark of Modesto



The monster shark on display probably in San Francisco in 1887. (1)

The giant rotting fish stunk. It had been caught the week before and had been on display in a San Francisco park for several days. Its 10,000 pounds of rotting flesh filled the neighborhood with a stench (2). People complained but still they came by the thousands and paid 15 cents to see the great man-eating shark. Twenty years later, a group of businessmen used the same dead shark as bait to successfully lure new residents to Modesto. How did they do it?

The Shark

In late April 1887, a 35-foot basking shark was caught in fishing nets near Monterey Bay. By the end of the month, the mostly harmless shark was being falsely billed as a monster man-eater to promote its exhibition in San Francisco. In just two days, more than 4,000 people came to see the dead and smelly creature. Eventually, the shark was stuffed and exhibited again in San Francisco for 25 cents a look “together with his backbone, heart, eyes, organs of pregnation and a portion of the stomach containing locks of human hair.” (3) Then the preserved shark began a national tour that lasted for more than 28 years.

Beginning in 1897, the shark, sometimes billed as a whale, was part of a touring exhibition in two specially equipped railroad cars owned and operated by Mondula Leak, an experienced advertising man from San Francisco. Leak had hired the Southern Pacific Railroad Shops in Sacramento to build his soon-to-be patented main exhibition car. The car was 73 feet long, had display cases around the outside (4), was lit inside and out with electric lights powered by a generator (5), and had an interior that could be transformed from an exhibit space into sleeping quarters via cots that descended from the ceiling. Beginning in 1891, Leak contracted the two railroad cars out for traveling promotional exhibitions particularly of California counties including Placer, Santa Clara, Napa, Marin, Mendocino, Lake, Sonoma, and Stanislaus. The shark joined the exhibition when the car was promoting Santa Clara County. →

Newspaper ad for the Stanislaus County Exhibit Cars, *Albion Argus* (Nebraska), 5 May 1906, p. 5

The Stanislaus County Exhibition Cars

From 1905 to 1909, businessmen from San Jose and A. B. Shoemaker and Z. E. Drake of Modesto, with encouragement from the Modesto Board of Trade, hired Mondula Leak and his two railroad exhibition cars to travel around the country to promote Modesto and Stanislaus County. The businessmen, who together owned the Sunset Land and Home Company, planned to sell real estate to the families that would come to the area after seeing the traveling exhibits (6).

Besides the monster shark, the Stanislaus Exhibition Cars had other attractions including photographs of Modesto and Stanislaus County, a large exhibit of preserved and fresh fruits and vegetables from the area, and an eclectic collection of natural wonders that had nothing to do with Stanislaus County. They included a stuffed ostrich; Nick, a small live bear; Bob and Josephine, two monkeys; a live alligator; guinea pigs; and a great assortment of fish, seashells, coral, and bones. One newspaper described the exhibits as a miniature World's Fair (7) but the big draw was the monster man-eating shark.

The Stanislaus County Exhibition Cars opened September 16, 1905, in Mankato, Minnesota, where more than 1500 visited on the first day (8). Until late August 1909, the cars visited dozens, maybe hundreds, of towns in Minnesota, Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska. Literature about Modesto and the county was distributed in several languages including English, Finnish, Italian, French, and Swedish (9).

A Success for Modesto

The shark, other unusual specimens, and strange artifacts successfully attracted thousands of people to the exhibit cars where they also learned about Modesto and Stanislaus County. Several people then took advantage of railroad excursion fares to visit the county. A group of



Stanislaus County Calif- Exhibit at C. & N.W. depot Thursday and Friday May 17th and 18th

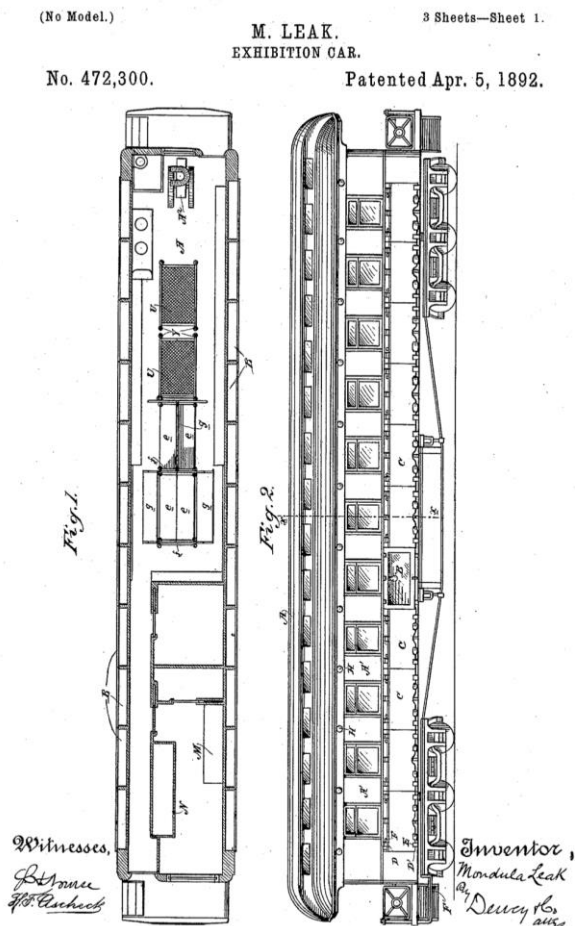
WHAT YOU WILL SEE IN CAR NO. 1—The finest exhibition car on the road, costing \$25,000.00. Fruits and vegetables—Regular eye openers. Jim Corbett, a California bred ostrich. (How many children or grown folks either, ever saw an ostrich?) The largest collection of sea shells, corals, natural history specimens ever placed on public exhibition.

CAR NO. 2 CONTAINS the Monster Elephant Shark, the Bulldog Shark—a man eater. The Hammer Headed Shark—a man eater. The Sea Angel, Alligator, Peruvian Cavies, (the cutest little animals known of.) Josephine, a Philippine Monkey, the pet of all, and more natural curiosities than you have ever seen for ten times the price we charge.

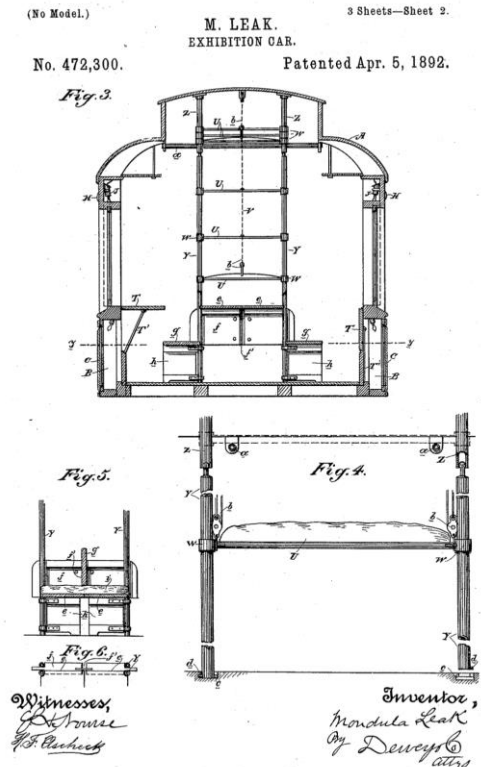
CLOSE 9:30 PM **MODESTO BOARD OF TRADE** OPEN 8:30 AM

about 30 people arrived in Modesto in March 1906, after seeing the exhibition in Iowa (19). Another group, from Nebraska, planned to come in April 1906 (11). There are newspaper reports about individual families coming to the area after seeing the exhibits (12). In 1907, the Modesto Board of Trade reviewed the work of Mondula Leak and the exhibition cars and concluded, "That the scheme is a success is evidenced by the number of buyers and investors that have recently made their way into Stanislaus county." (13) In 1908, the Modesto Board of Trade considered purchasing the exhibition cars but decided against it because they had no way of maintaining them (14). Though their number is unknown, the businessmen thought that they had successfully lured new residents to Modesto and the county using a monster man-eating shark as bait. →





Patent drawings for M. Leak Exhibition Car



Notes:

- 1) Stuffed basking shark caught at Monterey, California, photographer A.H. Rogers, 1887 to 1898, probably 1887 to 1889 in California, Daniel Carter Beard Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/90707756/>
Other sources confirm this as the shark that would eventually be exhibited in the Stanislaus County Exhibition Cars.
- 2) *Petaluma Courier*, May 4, 1887, page 2
- 3) *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 7, 1887, page 2
- 4) *Daily Northwestern*, (Oshkosh, Wisconsin), March 4, 1907, page 6
"The Stanislaus County exhibit cars are arranged with show cases attached to the outside of the cars showing specimens of grains, fruits, grasses, etc. raised in Stanislaus County. It also shows a number of large photos showing the system of irrigation."
- 5) The Electric Plant on Leak's Advertising Car, *Electrical Engineer*, May 4, 1892, page 465

- 6) "The principal object of the exhibit was to show how luxuriously fruit etc. grow in California, and especially in Stanislaus County, and to induce people to invest in that section. The showing of fruit was splendid. The peaches, oranges, prunes and grapes made one's mouth water to look at them. We have not had their equal before. The productiveness of the soil could be judged by the great height of the oats, hemp, wheat and corn displayed. One cornstalk measured 19½ feet."
Algona Advance (Iowa), October 12, 1905, page 8
- 7) *The Fort Wayne Sentinel*, June 12, 1909, page 3
- 8) *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, October 13, 1905, page 5
"Stanislaus on Wheels Scores a Big Hit East"
- 9) *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, June 28, 1907, page 4
- 10) Thirty Iowans Are Inspecting Stanislaus, *Stockton Daily Evening Record*, March 5, 1906, p. 5
- 11) *Banner Press* (David City, Nebraska), March 21, 1906, page 4
- 12) *Fresno Morning Republican*, November 1, 1907, page 3
- 13) Exhibit Cars Run for County's Good, *Fresno Morning Republican*, September 28, 1907, p. 12
- 14) *Modesto News*, December 22, 1908, Page 1

Modesto Art Museum and the Modesto History Center



The Modesto Art Museum (modestoartmuseum.org) has been uncovering the railroad history of Modesto, California, through its Modesto History Center Program. The museum was also instrumental in educating the citizens of Modesto in their efforts to preserve and renovate the historic 1915 Southern Pacific Depot.

The mission of the museum's Modesto History Center is to support the well-being of the people of Modesto through research, preservation, and education about the city's history and historic built environments (including railroad history). We do this in a way that builds community relationships, explores contemporary issues, and supports planning for a better future, and is of, by, and for the people of Modesto.

Supporting the well-being of the people of Modesto.

