

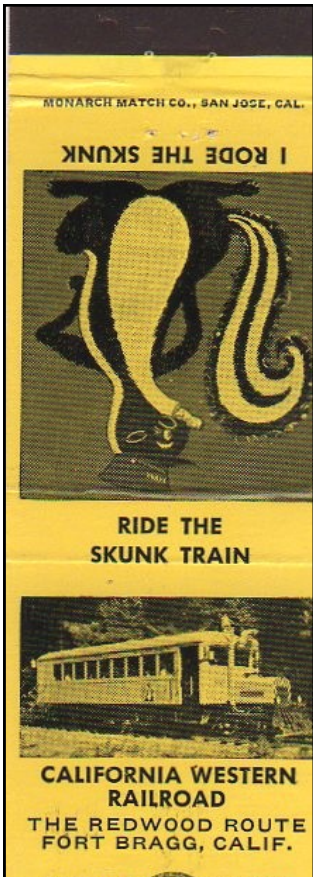


The Skunk Train

[Reprinted from 1997]

Several years ago, I drove the whole family up to Willits and we took a ride on the famed Skunk Train. It was marvelous! Pulled along by a vintage 1935 MS-300 engine, we were in awe of the majestic scenery. My wife, of course, sat inside, but the kids and I *[coming from heartier, pioneer stock]* stood in one of the open-air cars, the wind in our faces, looking at the towering redwoods, smiling at the deer, smelling the forest and clean mountain air. It was great! And, the weather was perfect *[which goes without saying, because, of course, this is California after all!]*.

“What *is* the Skunk Train?” you out-of-staters might be asking yourself. Well, officially known as the California Western Railroad, it was originally a logging railroad, dating back to 1885. Steam passenger service was started in 1922, but discontinued in 1925 when the self-powered yellow “skunk” rail cars were inaugurated. The little trains were nicknamed for their original gas engines, prompting folks to say, “You can smell ‘em before you can see ‘em.” Now, as then, travel on this line is delightfully casual, with frequent stops to deliver mail and groceries to areas inaccessible by car.



The California Western also operates passenger trains called “Super Skunks,” powered by historic diesel and steam logging locomotives and featuring open observation cars. Old No. 45, a 1924 Baldwin Steam Engine, is put into use on many trips during the summer months, with the diesel locomotives and motorcars being used frequently, as well. There are two round trips daily to Northspur during the summer months and a full day trip to the end of the line (Willits or Fort Bragg, depending on where you start from). The route, itself, runs 40 miles from Fort Bragg on the coast to Willits on US Highway 101. Whatever train and schedule you pick, you’ll cross many of the 30 bridges and trestles along this scenic redwood route (almost one bridge per mile of track!), as well as pass through one of the line’s two deep mountain tunnels.

Although the Skunk Train operates all year, the peak season is from June through the end of September. Special trains are run from time to time: barbecues, robberies, and Shakespear are among the themes. Full-day excursion fees are \$26 (adults) and \$12 (children, 5-11). Half day or one-way excursion fares are \$21 (adults) and \$10 (children, 5-11). Children under 5 generally ride free. This is really a great weekend jaunt for the family. If you go, be sure and bring a camera! In Willits, board at 299 E. Commercial St (707-459-5248; in Ft. Bragg, board at 100 Laurel St (707-964-6371).

[Check out <http://www.skunktrain.com/choose-a-trip-april-may.html>]

