

Diamond Match Company's Chico Plant

by Mike Schwimmer

In Paradise, California, just a few miles south of Chico, is the small Paradise Depot Museum, opened in July 2007 to commemorate the old Butte County Railroad. Inside is a miniature replica of the small line that stretched from Chico up to Stirling City. And along the pint-sized tracks are intricate models of the Diamond Match factory in Chico and Diamond's lumber mill in Stirling City. Diamond created the railroad in order to transport lumber and its workers living in Stirling City to the match factory in Chico.

I was in Chico recently to visit my daughter and family there and decided to try to find out something about the old Diamond plant that had operated in Chico throughout the first half of the 1900's. My research sent me to the Gold Nugget Museum in Paradise who told me about their smaller site in the old Paradise Railroad depot and that they'd be happy to send a docent over there to meet me and show me through it even though it was only open on weekends.

I met Dave Cordell at the site and was astounded to see the replica of the Diamond factories that he himself had helped to build. I took a number of pictures, some of which you see here in the Philluminator. Here's a bit of history on Diamond Match's Western operation:

Chico Flume and Lumber Co. set up two sawmills in 1871 at the headwaters of Big Chico Creek. In 1875, they became the Sierra Flume and Lumber Co., soon to be the largest single lumber enterprise in the world by 1877, a growth that happened too fast. At the turn of the century, Sierra Lumber found itself in trouble, and the owners wanted to sell the company land.

Around this time, the Barber Match Co. of Ohio had joined with 11 other match companies to form a conglomerate, the Diamond Match Company. John Heard Comstock, an employee of Diamond Match, arrived in Chico in June 1901 to purchase timberland. And in September, he and other executives of the company formed the Chico Investment Co., secured an option on the Sierra Lumber Co. land and sold the property and its timberland to Diamond Match. Fred M. Clough, a member of the Chico Investment Co., became the first Pacific Coast manager at Diamond Match. At the time, the plant site encompassed 125 acres in what is now called Stirling City.

The land was originally purchased 1901 in order to farm lumber for the Diamond Match factories in the east and Midwest. Stirling City grew out of that land to help house and feed the employees. Once a railroad had been built to transport the logs down the hill from the Stirling land, Diamond purchased 240 acres south of Chico and began construction on a second factory to further process the lumber. By the time it was done, a company town called Barber was born – named after O.C. Barber, the first president of the original Diamond Match Co.

Barber was considered something of a Utopian town, consisting of a social hall, swimming pool, stores, and nice bungalow houses for employee housing. Today, the bungalows are very easy to spot, with a large porch and a basement, and an almost symmetrical floor plan consisting of a front door between two front windows, two windows on each side wall, and a window on either side of the back door. These houses are scattered throughout south Chico, and are still called Diamond Match houses.

The Diamond Match Co. site in Chico had an engineering building, a power- house, a planing mill, warehouses, an office and lumber yards. Later the Butte County Railroad Depot was added. The Chico plant engineering department became a machine shop and foundry. It serviced locomotives and designed and manufactured logging "donkeys," mechanized log pullers. A box factory was added, producing wooden

boxes made for shipping produce.

The match factory was actually the last facility to be built at the Chico plant and the last to become operational because it had been dangerous to produce matches in Chico's summer heat.

The Diamond Match Co. had an estimated 3.5 billion feet of standing lumber in 1908 but much of it was difficult to access, or of poor quality. In 1909, a new president brought in an engineer to overhaul company operations. The veneer plant was losing money, the turpentine plant and wood pulp mill had never been built and the company could not afford to build them.

New management cut back operations in California to help the company's financial standing. The Chico facilities were abandoned until 1919, when the company started a millwork factory on the site. A new office was built for the Chico plant in 1920. Safety, fire insurance, fire prevention and planning all became a bigger part of the operations at Diamond Match. World War II brought higher production and the need for replanting trees, but it was the end of an era for the lumbering industry in the Chico area. The last crew finished up in 1959. Eventually, Louisiana Pacific, which closed operations, purchased the plant and surrounding land.

The Diamond Match Factory is the land that surrounds the southern extremity of West 16th Street in Chico. The main building burnt to the ground sometime in 2003 and the area is currently primed for development: the so-called "Barber Yard."

If you ever find yourself in the Sacramento area of northern California, a short drive up to Paradise and the Depot Museum would certainly be worth your while.

