

COURTLAND ARIZONA

Railroads



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Cover photograph: railroad spike, Southern Pacific track bed, Courtland Arizona.

Railroads made the settlement of the southwest possible. They brought food, tools, lumber, hardware, furniture, clothing, medicine, mining machinery, and farming equipment. They also brought settlers, workers, doctors, visitors, and even the occasional politician. In the abstract, they also brought a feeling of connection, of security, and of national unity.

For a mining town, railroads were as necessary as shovels and drills. It may be difficult for a modern person to really comprehend the excitement caused by the building of a railroad through a territory, let alone the actual establishment of a railroad station in the neighborhood. The surveying, grading, laying and finishing of track were followed mile by mile, sometimes even yard by yard, by residents and businesses the way box scores are followed by a baseball fanatic.

Railroad empires, and those who ran them, were viewed with an awe and deference which bordered on idolatry, not unreasonable considering the immense power that railroads had in the development and survival of a territory. In the town of Courtland, the arrival and departure of the railroads marked the beginning, and the end, of hope for the town. From the perspective of the railroad companies, towns such as Courtland were seen both as lucrative business opportunities and as pawns in an intricate game of power politics.

In 1908, when copper ore was discovered in Courtland and the big mining companies began operations there, it sparked a race to build tracks into the town. Twenty-five miles to the north the Southern Pacific (S.P.) ran the "Sunset Limited" from coast to coast along its trans-continental tracks. A water stop in the town of Cochise provided the jumping-off point for tracks to be connected south through the Sulphur Springs Valley, towards Courtland, Gleeson, and even down to Douglas and the Mexican border.

Twenty-five miles to the south, the El Paso & Southwestern (EP&SW) had a line running between the huge mines of Bisbee and the smelter operation in Douglas, and continuing on to El Paso. These two rival railroads began building track at a furious pace up into Courtland, each in an attempt to outflank the other. Each also had ulterior motives for winning this race, far beyond the

benefits which might accrue to the lowly town of Courtland. For the EP&SW, allowing the Southern Pacific access into Douglas and the southern border would so undercut their business that it could well spell the end of the company.

For the Southern Pacific, the motivation was more complex, but just as powerful. The S.P. was owned by the Union Pacific Railroad Company, whose chairman was the famous E.H. Harriman. It was his dream, his obsession, to build a transportation empire including trains and ships which would make it possible to circumnavigate the globe without ever leaving the Harriman line. He was convinced that a monopoly was economically necessary in order to viably do this. As a result, he desperately wanted to maintain his monopoly on Atlantic-to-Pacific rail travel across the southern United States. The lowly Rock Island Railroad, however, was threatening to break this monopoly.

The Rock Island had built, bought, or negotiated its way from the Atlantic all the way through the midwest and into New Mexico. It had also negotiated a deal with a railroad running from San Diego to Yuma. The only chunk of the country they hadn't managed to get across was Arizona. From New Mexico to Yuma, the Rock Island had no connection. This is where the EP&SW came into the power struggle. The EP&SW was built by mining interests (specifically the Phelps Dodge mining company) as a way of transporting their ore from one processing plant to another. Along the way, they included passenger and freight service as a sort of side-line. If the Rock Island could make an arrangement to use the tracks of the EP&SW from New Mexico to Yuma, its connection from coast to coast would be complete.

E.H. Harriman didn't want that to happen. It became one of his pet projects to undermine the business of the EP&SW so deeply that it would fold, thereby collapsing the plans of the Rock Island line to go cross country. That would leave the Southern Pacific as the sole provider of trans-continental rail traffic across the southern United States. So Harriman started building a line from Cochise south, heading towards Douglas, with spurs into Courtland and Gleeson. At least, that was the plan. In the meantime, the EP&SW

started building a line north out of Douglas and into Courtland. The race was on, and the stakes were high for both companies. Tiny Courtland found itself right in the middle of this fight, and profited greatly from the competition, the publicity, and the construction.

The EP&SW had the advantage of being a more local company, with connections and contacts in the town of Courtland. It also used laborers who were local, and could move quickly, where the S.P. imported its crews from further afield. While the surveyors of the S.P. were still trying to figure out the best way to come into town, negotiators for the EP&SW had already signed contracts with eager local landowners for rights-of-way into Courtland...on two different routes. The EP&SW came up the Sulphur Springs Valley and created the junction station of Kelton. This station, which no longer exists, sat three miles east of the southern tip of Courtland. With the success of the Silver Bill mine in Gleeson, it was thought that Kelton would make the perfect junction point for serving both Courtland and Gleeson. The EP&SW ran north into and just past Kelton, then split into two “fingers” which encircled Courtland. The northern finger ran up the gulch between central and north Courtland. In fact, it ran right up between the Germania and the Mary mines, the two biggest producers. From there, it used a double-switchback to continue around the hills into the Leadville Mining Company’s holdings to the west of central Courtland.

The southern finger of the EP&SW ran in a meandering gentle grade around a hill, circling around the Courtland cemetery and into the Great Western Townsite, where it turned north right through the houses and businesses there and up to the big mines. In effect, the EP&SW encircled the majority of the town of Courtland like a finger and thumb, almost connecting in a loop, but not quite.

The Southern Pacific, having been beaten into Courtland by the more agile EP&SW, decided to use the station at Kelton to build a spur which touched Courtland only on the far south side and continued around the tip of the mountains into Gleeson. Passengers and supplies were the mainstay of the S.P. operations in Courtland and Gleeson. While the S.P. station in Courtland (originally called

“Blacks”) was inconveniently located south of town and had to be reached by horse, by wagon, or by a local “taxi” coach service, it did have the advantage of being connected with the main Southern Pacific line in Cochise, which ran to all points east and west with little hassle. Passengers who wanted to go to Los Angeles, San Francisco, St. Louis, Chicago, or New York could purchase a ticket at Blacks up to Cochise, where they could stay in a local hotel and wait for the next east or west bound train right to either coast.

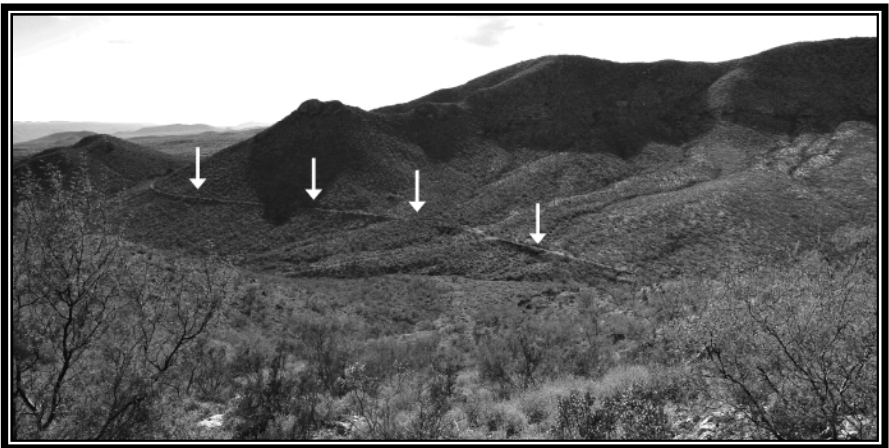
EP&SW customers, on the other hand, had to purchase tickets on several trains to make that same journey. The EP&SW had a monopoly, however, on Courtland’s ore business, since its tracks ran right up to every major mine in town. As far as Courtland was concerned, the two railroads ended in a tie. But Harriman was still determined to undermine the EP&SW’s business by building into Douglas.

In April of 1909, the Southern Pacific had laid down survey stakes all the way into Douglas, and beyond into Mexico. In August, grading work began on the railroad bed between Courtland and Douglas, with the track-layers working close behind. The bed was completed between Courtland and Douglas, and the tracks had been laid within a mile of Douglas when on September 9, 1909 Edward Henry Harriman died. The passing of this little man changed everything in the railroad business. It was the drive of E.H. Harriman which had emphasized the importance of building the S.P. into Douglas, as well as scores of other projects. When Harriman died, all of those pet projects were put on hold until they could be evaluated by his successors. By the time they were evaluated, the mines in Courtland had begun to decline, and the business of both rival railroads in the area declined with them.

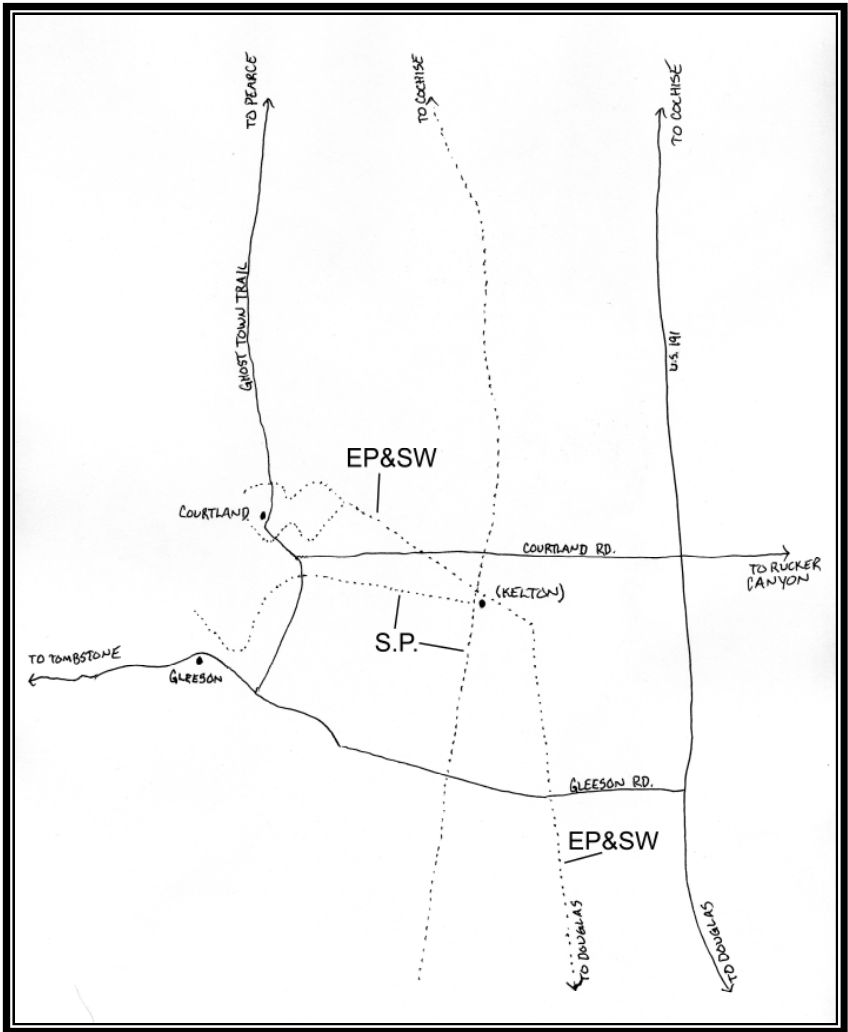
After World War I, copper prices dropped, and the fortunes of the EP&SW railroad changed. It no longer made sense for Phelps Dodge to continue to operate it. The entire system was bought by the Southern Pacific in November of 1924. In the spring of 1933 all trains to Courtland and Gleeson stopped running, and the tracks were picked up by New Year’s Day of 1934.

It is still possible to walk the track bed of the El Paso & Southwestern (both fingers) through Courtland. You can also walk the Southern Pacific bed from Gleeson, around the mountain and through southern Courtland to within a half-mile of the old Kelton station. All the stations in Courtland are gone, with only a few cut-off telephone-pole sized foundation timbers remaining. The rails are long gone, as are the wooden ties. Walking along the bed, an observant hiker can find the occasional bolt, hook, spike, or other hardware that was left behind when the rails were picked up. Date nails can also be found, usually near the location of a trestle, bridge, or station structure. Some sections of the bed look like blackened gravel. Those are the places where coal fell off the train and was trampled upon and crushed.

The railroads were the blood vessels which provided for growth in many mining towns. In many ways the history of the railroad *is* the history of a town. Courtland was just such a town. When the blood vessels were removed, the town shriveled up and died. Still, walking along the rail beds and finding a rusted railroad spike or the remains of a trestle over a gully can provide a little hint of the excitement that the rails brought to a town such as Courtland more than a hundred years ago.



The tracks of the Southern Pacific ran along a grade which snaked around the mountains out of Courtland and into Gleeson. The railroad bed can still be seen and walked, and is indicated by arrows in the above photograph.



Rail beds of the El Paso & Southwestern (EP&SW) and the Southern Pacific (S.P.) lines into Courtland and Gleeson.

The EP&SW line came up from Douglas, crossed at the Kelton station, and virtually encircled Courtland.

The S.P. line came down from Cochise, entered south of Courtland and continued to Gleeson. The S.P. tracks were laid almost to Douglas, but were not completed, and no S.P. train ever ran between Kelton and Douglas.