

“The Santa Fe Depot”

I take pleasure in advising the people of San Diego, that the Santa Fe Company has today awarded a contract for the new passenger station in your city. . . The work will be commenced at once.

--A. G. Wells, Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, May 23, 1914.

The telegram to the San Diego *Union* from the general manager of the Santa Fe Railway was the “final assurance” that San Diego would soon have a new grandiose train station to replace the small depot at the foot of Broadway. “The work will be rushed with all possible speed,” promised William Sampson, the building contractor for the new station.

Speed would certainly be necessary if the new station were to be ready in time for the opening of the city’s Panama-California Exposition on January 1, 1915. The Exposition would be San Diego’s year-long coming out party—a celebration of the U. S. first port of call on the Pacific Coast. Planners anticipated thousands of people would soon begin arriving by train.

The new Santa Fe depot was expected to be the finest passenger station in California. Designed by the San Francisco architects John R. Bakewell and Arthur Brown, Jr., the beautiful, mission-style architecture would be a striking first sight for San Diego visitors. Twin, domed towers dominated the architecture. Elaborate tile work covered the roof and walls.

Two city blocks long, with a vast waiting area and expansive ticket office, the facility would handle huge crowds “without the slightest congestion.” The \$300,000 depot would be a “union” station, serving not only Santa Fe but also John D. Spreckels’ new railroad, the San Diego & Arizona. Like many Santa Fe stations, the new depot featured a Fred Harvey dining room and a Harvey “novelty” booth.

Construction began on May 27, 1914. The site was only yards from the old depot, built by the California Southern Railroad in 1887 (and scheduled for demolition once the new station was opened). With months of good weather expected, the contractors confidently expected to finish by the contract deadline of December 15.

The building went smoothly but politics did not. Trouble began in August when Santa Fe petitioned the city council to close the lower end of B Street where it crossed the new railroad tracks. General Manager Wells pointed out that the new station would be of little use without the room to handle trains of a dozen or more cars. Unless the street was closed the railroad would have to uncouple and couple every train which pulled into the new station.

The council denied the petition. Property owners on B Street feared the lack of access to the bay front. Former mayor D. C. Reed lobbied against the closure, citing “old controversies” with the railroad and stoking fears of a city giveaway to Santa Fe.

As the new station neared completion in November, the railroad renewed the request. The proposal was endorsed by G. Aubrey Davidson, president of the coming Exposition. “These

plans will give better service, and as president of the Exposition I am anxious that the permission be granted.” Directors of the downtown Merchants’ Association also supported the Santa Fe proposal.

The city council scrambled for alternatives. A viaduct was proposed to bridge the closed portion of the street. Others suggested a subway under B Street. When the council tried to compromise with a proposed three-year closure of the street, Santa Fe officials declared “the railroad would not permit itself to be ‘put on probation’ for three years by the citizens of San Diego.”

To pressure the city, the railroad halted all construction on the new station. Shipments of materials stopped, carloads of paving brick sat unloaded, and workers were sent home.

On January 1 the Exposition opened. The new depot sat empty.

As the controversy lingered, Exposition president Davidson said, “The crime of the year in San Diego is that the new Santa Fe station is not open. The Santa Fe should not be blamed, for its position is justified.” Respected businessman George W. Marston seconded Davidson, adding “I favor the permanent closing of B Street for the general good of the city . . . the interests of the city and the railroad are mutual.”

The council finally bowed to the inevitable and agreed to close the street. The railroad announced they would open the depot on Sunday night, March 7.

After the months of feuding between the city and the railroad, there was little sentiment for an official opening ceremony. The San Diego *Sun* suggested, somewhat apologetically, that formal “jollification” would be announced later. Still, five thousand San Diegans were on hand, according to the *Union*, when the station opened at 6:30 p.m. “just as a 9-coach passenger train, crowded with Exposition visitors from the North and East, rolled in from Los Angeles.”

San Diegans and visitors found the new station “ablaze from end to end with electric lights” as they inspected and approved of every detail. “Words of praise were heard from all sides” and “former difficulties between Santa Fe officials and the city became nothing but incidents to be forgotten in the building of a greater commercial San Diego.”

One dedication ceremony *had* been planned. Oliver J. Stough, a 96-year old veteran of the Mexican War, was given the honor buying the first ticket sold from the Santa Fe ticket window. Stough bought his ticket from E. D. Johnston, the deputy city clerk and son of the contractor who had built San Diego’s first railroad depot in 1887.

The Santa Fe Depot would thrive for decades but increasing automobile use and the rise in air travel diminished its value by the 1960s. Santa Fe nearly razed the depot with office towers and apartments in the 1970s. Public opposition squashed the development plans and led instead to historic preservation of the old depot, which today serves as the ninth busiest railroad station in the national Amtrak System.



The Santa Fe depot, circa 1920.

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