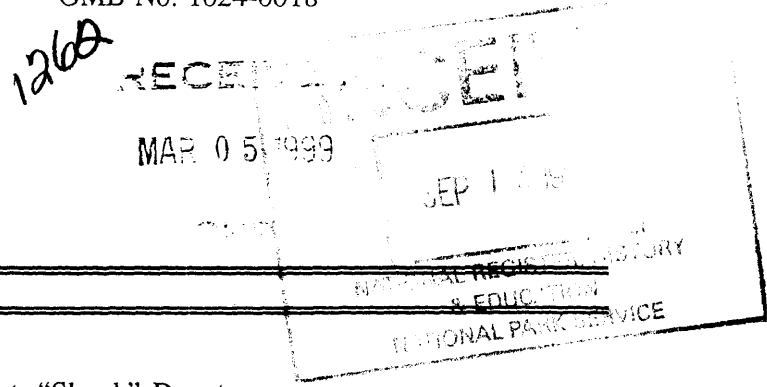


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM**

**1. Name of Property**

historic name: Willits Depot  
other name/site number: Northwestern Pacific Depot; "Skunk" Depot

**2. Location**

street & number: East Commercial Street

not for publication: N/A

city/town: Willits

vicinity: N/A

state: CA

county: Mendocino

code: 045

zip code: 95490

**3. Classification**

Ownership of Property: Public (North Coast Railroad Authority)

Category of Property: Buildings

Number of Resources within Property:

Contributing    Non-contributing

__3__	buildings	_____
_____	sites	_____
_____	structures	_____
_____	objects	_____
__3__	Total	_____

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: \_\_0\_\_

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

**4. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria.

See continuation sheet.

*Harriet Abeyta*  
Signature of certifying official

*Aug 31, 1999*  
Date

California Office of Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  
 See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

**5. National Park Service Certification**

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register  See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register  See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

*Paul B. Furgin*

*10/20/99*

*h* Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic:** Transportation

**Sub:** rail-related

**Current:** Commerce/trade

**Sub:** specialty store

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification:**

Late 19th and early 20th century American Movements  
Bungalow/Craftsman

**Materials: foundation** Concrete  
**walls** Wood

**roof** Asphalt  
**other** N/A

**Present and historical physical appearance.**

See continuation sheet.

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:**

statewide.

**Applicable National Register Criteria:** A and C

**Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) :** N/A

**Areas of Significance:** Architecture  
Transportation  
Rail

**Period(s) of Significance:** 1915 - 1925

**Significant Date(s):** 1915

**Significant Person(s):** N/A

**Cultural Affiliation:** N/A

**Architect/Builder:** Patterson, D. J.

**Significance of property, and criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.**

See continuation sheet.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

See continuation sheet.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of Property: Less than one acre  
UTM References: Zone Easting Northing

10 469896 4362399

\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description:  See continuation sheet.

The boundary of this property extends to Commercial Street on the north, the Northwestern Pacific mainline tracks on the east, the north edge of an alley on the south, and the legal property line on the west. See attached scale map on Continuation Sheet.

Boundary Justification: \_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

The boundaries have been drawn to include all of the historic buildings and their immediate setting. The original parcel extended across Commercial Street and included a roundhouse and other structures that are no longer extant.

**11. Form Prepared By**

Name/Title: Bonnie W. Snyder, Principal  
Organization: P.S. Preservation Services  
Street & Number: P.O. Box 191275  
City or Town: Sacramento

Date: February 8, 1999  
Telephone: (916) 736-1918  
State: CA ZIP: 95819

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The union depot built at Willits, California to serve the Northwestern Pacific Railroad and the California Western Railway consists of a complex of three wood frame buildings: the Depot proper, a Restaurant Building joined to it by a covered Breezeway, and a detached Baggage Building. All three buildings are of redwood construction throughout.

Depot

Measuring 80 feet by 20 feet and axially aligned north-south with the tracks it serves, the gable-roofed Depot has exterior walls of rough-sawn V-rustic siding, and 6/6 double-hung windows in wood sash with lambs-tongue drops on the upper sash rails. The building rests on a slightly raised foundation wall that is topped with a water table moulding. The east wall of the Depot is set back twelve feet from the roof edge to form a covered verandah offering shelter for waiting passengers (photos 5, 6). The east edge of the roof is carried by square, boxed pillars with simple dentilated capitals. The pillars in turn support an entablature whose architrave is a boxed beam; elaborate heavy brackets consisting of stacked timbers in turn carry a purlin that supports the roof eave (photo 5). Each bracket is decorated with dentil courses and applied wooden bosses in a floral pattern. The ceiling of the verandah consists of narrow V-rustic, and is broken into eight bays by transverse box beams running from each pillar to the east wall of the building proper, where they join shallow pilaster strips that divide the façade into an equal number of bays. Centered in each bay of the verandah ceiling is a round carved wooden boss, from which were originally suspended lights; the lights are no longer extant. The verandah floor is of red-tinted, scored concrete. The station operator's rectangular bay window projects eighteen inches into the verandah from the east wall of the Depot; from here the operator had a view north and south along the tracks, and could set train order semaphore signals (no longer extant) to alert train crews to orders awaiting them (photos 6, 9).

The medium-pitched gable roof is clad in asphalt shingles, and has broad, open eaves carried all around on the bracket system described above. Shed dormers are centered on the roof and bear decorative details consistent with the rest of the building (photos 1, 2, 9). The ends of the Depot are two bays wide, with a window in each bay at floor level echoed by nine-light windows above at attic level in the gable ends (photo 7). Above these attic windows is a broad decorative board that is scroll-sawn in Chaletesque fashion. Transverse box beams that run from the end pillars to carry the east side of the gable ends are carried across the end walls in the form of applied wall "beams"; at their ends (photo 7), the boards that form these "beams" are joined by elaborate double-scarf joints with hourglass-shaped pegs, a detail that further highlights the Craftsman design of the building (photo 8). The gable ends have broad, plain barge rafters with an applied dentil course and applied modillions. A brick chimney stack with an arched cap rises above the roof at the north end of the Depot (photo 7).

All windows have simple surrounds of broad boards. Windows along the sides of the building have round bosses carved in a foliar pattern applied to their lintels, while the lintels of the end windows are decorated with built-up bosses utilizing quatrefoil and star patterns (photo 7).

The upper walls of the Depot are decorated with a two-part frieze, with the lower portion in a foliated motif and the upper portion in an espadaña/inverted espadaña motif, both topped with a dentil course. The lower portion of the frieze also has applied quatrefoil details, while the upper portion has applied fleur-de-lis. Centered in the entablature on the east side are incised letters and numbers spelling out "19 WILLITS 15" to arriving passengers. On the eave above, letters spell out "BUILT OF CALIFORNIA REDWOOD" (photo 9).

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The interior of the Depot was originally divided into a passenger waiting room at the north end of the building, with a ticket counter and partial wall at its south end dividing it from the adjacent operator's bay and office at the center of the building, and Yard Office and other railroad office space at the south end of the building. Entry to the waiting room was through doors opening off the verandah on the east, or track, side and off the Breezeway connecting to the restaurant on the west side. Both doors have nine-light windows above a lower panel of three vertical boards, and are topped by three-light transoms providing further illumination (photo 10). The waiting room walls consist of a series of inset panels framed in moulding; smaller lower panels are divided at chair rail height from taller upper panels. At frieze level, curvilinear brackets whose sides are decorated with round bosses carry transverse ceiling beams (photo 11). Between the beams, the tongue-and-groove ceiling boards are laid up in herringbone pattern. At the north end of the room is a large fireplace faced with large, thick, glazed tiles, above which rises a tapered hood clad in clapboards. The floors throughout the building are of red battleship linoleum, likely original to the building.

The Depot has an extremely high degree of integrity. The six-light lower sash of one window has been replaced by a single-pane window, and the original door to the Yard Office has been replaced by an incompatible style door. The dormers in the depot have lost their original balconets with their carved railings. In the verandah the original chandeliers have been removed. A line of trim on the edge of the depot's gable roof that mimicked Mission tile has been removed. The former waiting room is now occupied by the gift shop for the California Western "Skunk" train. Some interior alterations were made to accommodate the gift shop, such as painting the originally clear-finished redwood paneled walls and ceiling, closing off the firebox of the fireplace with a wood panel and placing shelves in front of it, and building a partition between the waiting room operator's bay, but the moldings and panels are intact, as is the large, tile-trimmed fireplace on the north wall. The former operator's bay and office and Yard Office are currently occupied by a model railroad hobby shop, with a small model railroad layout set up in the operator's bay window. Walls here have been covered in veneer paneling, but this is attached to furring strips that left the original walls largely intact and undamaged. At the south end of the station was, and still is, the business office for the Northwestern Pacific Railroad. These alterations aside however, the Depot Building remains a contributive element of the Willits Depot complex.

Breezeway

Joining the depot and the restaurant is a gable-roofed semi-open breezeway, with the roof clad in asphalt shingles matching those of the Depot. This structure has low walls that have cut-out decoration in diamond, tulip, and apple motifs. Handrails at the top of the walls are carried on dentil courses. Simple posts with simplified brackets carry the roof. The Breezeway ceiling and interior entablature are divided into small coffers by applied wood strips (photo 12). The floor of the Breezeway is of red-tinted concrete in a diamond pattern. Wooden benches line both sides of the Breezeway, and were probably relocated there from the waiting room when that latter space was altered to gift shop use.

Virtually intact, the Breezeway retains a high degree of integrity, and remains a contributive element of the Willits Depot complex.

Restaurant Building

The Restaurant matches the depot in size and alignment, and in materials. Its basic design elements are also those of the depot, but are simplified in the restaurant building. The Restaurant lacks the scroll-sawn frieze

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bands and their applied ornamentation, as well as the applied bosses found on the Depot's brackets and window lintels. The attic windows in the gable ends of the Restaurant are smaller, four-light windows, and there are no dormers on the roof slopes. The Restaurant does, however, retain the line of trim on the end edges of the gable roof that mimic Mission tile. Above the main entry door just north of the Breezeway, the word "LVNCH" is incised in Roman-style lettering into the lintel above the three-light transom (photo 13). As is true for the Depot, a brick chimney with arched brick cap rises above the north end of the roof of the Restaurant.

Inside, the Restaurant Building has been largely gutted of its original decor, including the original double counter and all kitchen equipment, and altered by the insertion of temporary plywood partition walls. The interior surfaces of the exterior walls and the ceilings remain intact (photo 14). These are of milled tongue-and-groove, and the ceiling is divided into a series of large coffers by longitudinal and transverse box beams with flanking trim pieces. Applied pilaster strips divide the walls into a series of bays, with horizontal elements consisting of a dado-height rail, simple broad baseboard, and frieze strip. Flooring throughout is gray battleship linoleum, probably original, over a pine or Douglas fir floor. In places where the original walls have been covered by veneer paneling, the latter has been applied on furring strips tacked to the original walls, making an easily reversible alteration. At the north end of the restaurant space the original fireplace remains, though its tile facing has been painted and the firebox sealed by mortared concrete blocks, easily reversible alterations. Single-stall restrooms are located in the southeast corner of the building, adjoining a large original room that may have been the kitchen or a large storage space. All interior walls in these spaces are original.

Except for some boarded windows and the replacement of exterior doors, the exterior of the Restaurant Building has high integrity. The integrity of the interior is not as high, due to the removal of original restaurant furniture and kitchen elements. However, original walls remain largely intact, some portions still displaying original clear finishes, and later wall additions are temporary in nature and easily reversible. The Restaurant Building remains a contributive element of the Willits Depot complex.

#### Baggage Building

The Baggage Building, also built of redwood, is much smaller than the Depot and Restaurant buildings, and is much more modest in design elements (photos 3, 4). It also utilizes rough-sawn V-rustic exterior siding, with applied strip pilasters, frieze board, and baseboards. As is the case with the other buildings in the complex, its medium-pitched gable roof is clad in asphalt shingles, and has deep eaves with exposed rafter tails. The brackets in the gable ends are smaller and much less elaborate than those on the Depot and Restaurant, but are very similar in style. Each gable end also features a dentil course as virtually the only classical architectural detailing on the building. Two alterations have been made to the Baggage Building: the large baggage doorway in the east (trackside) façade has been infilled and fitted with a standard door, and two windows on the north end of the façade have been cut into the wall sometime after 1916. This interior of this building was originally a single large room; it has been altered recently to serve as a small restaurant. The baggage building retains a high degree of integrity and remains a contributive element of the Willits Depot complex.

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**Photo List:**

Willits Depot, East Commercial Street, Willits, Mendocino County, California.

Photographs 1-14, except numbers 4 and 9, were taken by John Snyder in August 1998. Numbers 4 and 9 were taken by Paul Douglas, Architect, Mendocino, CA, in October 1998.

Original negatives (and slides) are located at the offices of P.S. Preservation Services, Sacramento, CA.

- 1 Depot building and tracks, view to west.
- 2 Depot building and track, view to northwest.
- 3 Depot showing freight building in foreground and restaurant building at left. View to north/northwest.
- 4 Depot grouping with restaurant building at left and freight building at right. View to north/northeast.
- 5 Detail of verandah of depot, view to southwest.
- 6 Verandah of depot, view to south.
- 7 North end of depot and breezeway, view to southeast.
- 8 Detail of scarf joint on beam carrying gable end.
- 9 Detail of depot showing station operator's bay window and incised lettering.
- 10 Detail of door to waiting room.
- 11 Interior of depot, now gift shop.
- 12 Interior of breezeway, view to west.
- 13 Detail of incised lettering over lunchroom door.
- 14 Interior of restaurant building.

Historical Photos. Originals are available through Paul Douglas.

15. Depot building, c. 1915. View to southwest.
16. Depot building and freight building, c. 1915. View to northwest.
17. Depot, breezeway, and restaurant buildings, c. 1915. View to south.



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18. Detail of incised lettering on depot., c. 1915. View to west.
  19. Detail of verandah of depot, c. 1915. View to north.
  20. Detail of verandah and station operator's bay, c. 1915. View to north.
  21. Detail of verandah, showing construction and decoration of corner, c. 1915. View to southwest.
  22. Interior of waiting room, showing window to station operator's bay, c. 1915. View to southeast.
  23. Interior of waiting room, showing fireplace, c. 1915. View to northeast.

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The complex of buildings that forms the Willits Depot represents perhaps the most exuberant expression of the Craftsman style in the north coast region of California, and is unquestionably the finest expression of that style in railroad station architecture in California.<sup>1</sup> It is associated with the final push to completion of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad in closing of the gap between Willits and Eureka that finally provided a land link between the north coast area of California and San Francisco Bay Area shipping and supply centers, and national and world markets. It is also closely associated with the growth of tourism in the north coast area of California, in which role it continues today. The Willits Depot retains a high degree of integrity and appears to meet National Register criteria A and C, at the state level of significance.

The Northwestern Pacific Railroad had its origins in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1860s. The potential profits in capturing the rail traffic for logging operations in the counties north of San Francisco were a powerful inducement for ambitious investors. Thus it was just a matter of time before well-financed business ventures began to consolidate the early railroads that had begun to penetrate Marin and Sonoma County forests. The dense stands of redwood in the Russian River area were an additional attraction for outside investors. In 1869, San Franciscan Peter Donahue incorporated the San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad, and by early 1870 he had extended the line from San Rafael to Santa Rosa. In 1871 he sold the line to the Central Pacific, which pushed it through to Cloverdale later that year and then sold it back to Donahue in 1873. During the 1870s and 1880s Donahue continued to organize and build other connecting lines, as well as to expand the SF&NP, establishing a large yard and operations office in Marin County at Tiburon. Following Donahue's death in late 1885, his son James assumed control and pushed the line up to Ukiah by 1889. But by this time the railroad was in difficult financial circumstances and underwent a corporate reorganization. James Donahue died in 1890, and executors of the Donahue estate ran the railroad for the next three years. When the SF&NP finally failed during the Panic of 1893, a syndicate made up of investors, Andrew Markham, Sydney V. Smith, and A.W. Foster bought it at auction.

Though the syndicate continued to build and improve branch lines to tap new logging territory, financial problems persisted. In 1898 the group offered the railroad for sale, and it was purchased by lease to the California Northwestern Railway Company on September 30, 1898. The Southern Pacific Railroad was one of the principal shareholders of the California Northwestern, and with financial backing from SP, construction to the north and the wealth of redwood lumber in Humboldt County began again. In anticipation of the arrival of adequate transport to San Francisco and wider markets, A.W. Foster--former member of the syndicate that had run the railroad a few years earlier-- built a large, modern mill just outside Willits at Sherwood for his Northwestern Redwood Lumber Company. The railroad reached Laughlin in early 1901, and arrived in Willits on March 1, 1902. Willits greeted the railroad's arrival with great fanfare, as hopes mounted for the further extension to Eureka as workers pushed the line on through to Foster's Northwestern Redwood mill at Sherwood, reaching that point in May 1904. Further progress north then stalled for three long years. Still, the railroad's presence in Willits brought prosperity as lumber companies such as Northwestern Redwood, and the Irvine & Muir Lumber Company expanded their operations. The problem inhibiting further rail construction northward lay in that direction.

In and around Eureka, the rival Santa Fe Railroad had bought several small railroads in Humboldt County which they intended to build south to San Francisco Bay. These plans easily blocked further expansion for a railroad that was as chronically undercapitalized as the California Northwestern. Competing for domination of the redwood lumber traffic, the Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe soon realized that the potential for profit was insufficient for both railroads to enter the Humboldt market. So in January 1907 the railroad

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<sup>1</sup> See page 5, paragraph 3.

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giants reached an agreement to end their rivalry and formed a jointly-owned railroad, incorporated as the Northwestern Pacific. After several delays work on the extension from Willits to Eureka began in earnest. (This agreement between rivals may not have been as surprising as it seems at first glance: Edward H. Harriman, who owned and controlled the Southern Pacific, also owned considerable stock in the Santa Fe; if not enough to control the railroad outright then his holdings were certainly enough to influence operational and other decisions. He undoubtedly played a large role in forcing cooperation between the rival giants.)

The Sherwood extension was a dead-end so far as further extension northward went. Thus, surveyors pushed north from Willits in October 1907, followed closely by Utah Construction Company crews. The push was short-lived, however, as a nationwide depression halted construction in January 1908; work was not to resume until November 1909. On the north end, crews of the San Francisco-based Willet and Burr Company pushed south from Shively, reaching Fort Seward on May 3, 1914. Utah Construction drove the line northward to reach Fort Seward on September 22, 1914. Workers finally drove the last spike on the Eureka extension at Cain Rock shortly thereafter, completing the link to wider markets and passenger connections from California's northwest redwood country to the Bay Area.

This direct rail link represented a major new development in the redwood lumber industry and in the communities served by the Northwestern Pacific. When the NWP entered the redwood country of Mendocino and Humboldt Counties, large scale logging and milling operations--usually owned by wealthy investors who lived outside the area--dominated the lumber industry in California's northwest. As mentioned earlier, in 1901 the Northwestern Redwood Company had opened its sizable sawmill in Sherwood Valley, a few miles north of Willits. With some of the same people on the board of the NWP also on Northwestern Redwood's board, the railroad's extension to Sherwood--which was not on the directly line to Eureka--was no coincidence. Logging redwoods on the massive scale needed to sustain the type of large sawmills as the Northwestern Redwood's required ready access to the highly profitable lumber market in the Bay Area and beyond, and the NWP provided that access for the investors.

The railroad's economic and social impact on Willits in particular was substantial. Between 1900 (two years before the arrival of the NWP) and 1910 the town's population increased by 50%, from 791 to 1,153, and it grew to 1,460 by 1920. The Irvine and Muir Lumber Company built a new sawmill during this period, and working for the railroad became an important source of employment for locals. Willits experienced a building boom in an effort to house the influx of laborers attracted to the region by the hope of jobs on the NWP or in the sawmills or logging camps. The town gained a fine new building in which were combined a theater and the post office. The changes wrought by the arrival of the railroad transformed Willits from an agricultural service center to a lumber town and transportation hub in a very short time. The NWP had a comparable impact on most of the towns along its tracks after the Eureka extension was completed. Willits became a first class station with both freight and scheduled passenger service, and a full-time agent managing the facility.

At its zenith around the 1920s the NWP was a complex system that extended rail service beyond the main line connecting Sausalito in Marin County with Eureka. It ran an interurban electric line in Marin County to serve travelers, and had ferry boats connecting Sausalito and Tiburon with San Francisco. The NWP controlled a short line between Sausalito and the redwood forests at Duncan Mills and Cazadero in Sonoma County. Three branch lines also served Albion, Guerneville, mid the towns of Sonoma and Glen Ellen, in addition to the branch line to Sherwood Valley in Mendocino County, and the line connecting Eureka with Trinidad in the north. Besides hauling lumber, the NWP was a major carrier of agricultural produce and livestock. Passenger service was also a principal source of revenue. Tourists seeking the splendor of the

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Mendocino and north coast redwoods, and San Franciscans escaping the city for an outing in the rural areas of Marin and Sonoma Counties depended on the NWP. In fact, tourism was so important for the railroad that it often ran special excursion trains in the summer. When freight traffic fell off sharply during the 1930s, the tourist business helped to sustain the NWP's flagging revenues.

The complex of NWP structures and buildings at Willits, as was the case for any railroad, changed considerably between 1902 and the 1950s. By 1903 there was a Southern Pacific standard-plan Number 22 two-story combination depot at the foot of Commercial Street, housing a freight room, baggage area, office, and waiting room under one roof, with dwelling quarters for the station agent on the second floor. Across the tracks were the warehouse, planing mill, and large lumberyard of the Northwestern Redwood Company. By 1912 the NWP had expanded its Willits facilities to also include a carpenter shop, two materials sheds, tool house, pump house, a large oil tank, sand house, corrals, and a five-stall roundhouse. Willits, about half way between the Bay Area and Eureka, was a division point on the NWP main line where trains changed crews before proceeding north or south, and where crews laid over before resuming duty. The facilities at Willits also provided some car and locomotive servicing facilities, and as a result the yard was a busy place through the years. Completion of the Eureka extension brought new, larger locomotives to Willits. Increased rail traffic soon required yard improvements and heavier tracks. Then, on top of the changes wrought by the arrival of the NWP, Willits experienced the arrival of a second railroad, the California Western Railway & Navigation Company's line from Fort Bragg.

The California Western was essentially a lumber railroad, begun at Fort Bragg in 1885 by the Fort Bragg Redwood Company. In 1891, Charles Russell Johnson arrived in Fort Bragg from Michigan to purchase interest in a local mill, from which humble beginnings he eventually founded Union Lumber Company, and he also bought the California Western. At first the railroad functioned to bring logs in to the mill. Finished lumber was shipped out to San Francisco on company lumber schooners. As logging operations progress upstream along the Noyo River watershed, the railroad followed. By the time the railroad reached the summit of the mountains, its owners realized that it could be driven through to Willits and a direct connection with the Northwestern Pacific. The benefits of direct rail shipment over ocean shipment were obvious, and thus it was that Union Lumber decided to push the line through to Willits, reaching there on December 19, 1911; the poor condition of the hastily-constructed roadbed and a persistent tunnel fire delayed regular service on the CWR until July 4, 1912. As a collateral improvement, Willits and Fort Bragg soon enjoyed improved telegraph and telephone service as workmen installed new lines between the two towns, following the railroad right-of-way.

The timing of the railroads' completions could not have been more fortuitous. Marking the completion of the Panama Canal and its promised impact on West Coast shipping, San Francisco hosted the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915. Prominent among the company displays at the fair were those of the redwood lumber companies of California's northwest coast, boosting their products before the attention of the world. Equally prominent were displays of new, modern railroad engines and cars by the Southern Pacific and its subsidiary lines like the Northwestern Pacific, with the railroad boosting tourism in the areas it served. Finally, the counties served by the NWP were also present, touting both the extent and wealth of their natural products and the idyll the area offered tourists. It was in that context, then, that the railroad undertook the construction of nine new depots following final completion of the line. At Willits, management of the railroad and of the lumber companies it served saw an opportunity to make the create a centerpiece, a physical promotion of the area's wealth of redwood and all that could be artistically accomplished with the wood.

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Though the railroad already had a perfectly serviceable depot in Willits that was little more than a decade old, construction of a new depot and associated restaurant and baggage buildings in Willits by the Northwestern Pacific gave dramatic evidence of the prosperity of both the railroad and the area and industry it served. This new building would constitute an Arts and Crafts style masterpiece testimony to the NWP's efforts to build stations compatible with the environment, or with traditions of the communities the railroad served. The general layout and configuration of the buildings conformed to the Southern Pacific standard company stations plans (here the Standard Plan No.18 developed for use on the Harriman lines), but the rich architectural details and obvious homage to the redwood lumber industry were unique. Utilizing architectural elements in the imagery of a Swiss or Alpine chalet, the company architects integrated the embellishments into the overall design in such a restrained manner that nothing appeared overdone. Since the new facility would serve two railroads, who could blame Willits for unabashed boosterism in terming it a "Union Depot?"

Though design of the station buildings first appeared in the Willits newspapers in December 1914, construction did not commence until August 1915, by which time crews had moved the one-story freight shed portion of the old depot directly north across Commercial Street where it continued to serve as the station freight shed. Meanwhile NWP crews had complained to union that they had no place to eat in Willits. In response, railroad brought in former narrow-gauge, open-air picnic cars, remodeled them into lunch cars, and placed them on the new site as well. Interestingly, the design of the new depot appears to have evolved from what would prove to be the final design, through one that would have been much more distinctly rustic, and back again into one that was a high-style reflection of the Arts and Crafts ethic. In August 1915 the *Willits News* reported on the commencement of work on the new depot, but now the paper reported a single two-story building with two waiting rooms on the ground floor and a dining room and railroad division offices on the second floor. The article stated that interior finishes would be in redwood burl and "of which would be the Northwestern Redwood Company had been selecting their finest lumber for nearly a year for the depot, and that the depot interior would emulate that of the lumber company's general offices. It thus appeared that A.W. Foster still had a role in the railroad. Precisely where this information originated is unknown, because when in May 1916 the new depot and restaurant officially opened, the ultimate design proved to be that which had been illustrated in the paper two years earlier: a pair of Craftsman/Chalet-style buildings standing side-by-side and joined by a covered breezeway. The materials for the building came not only from Northwestern Redwood, but also from the Irvine & Muir Lumber Company at Willits, and the Union Lumber Company at Fort Bragg, whose California Western Railway also served the Willits depot. As completed, the new depot sported what was reported as one of the largest fireplaces in California, and an interior that fairly glowed in natural-finished redwood.

As the largest and most imposing Craftsman-style building in Willits, some have credited the station as pivotal in helping to promote the popularity of Arts and Crafts architecture in the region. Indeed the building's design harkens back to the ethic of John Ruskin, the Englishman whose mid-19th-century books on architecture served as the inspiration for the late-19th century/early-20th century practitioners of the style that would be called "Arts and Crafts" in England, and came to be known as Craftsman in the U.S. That ethic was honesty in purpose, materials, and manufacture. Its values were handcraft, art, and the expression of structure. That the Willits Depot exemplifies this ethic and this style can be seen in the use of redwood to identify and express the area in which it was built, the use of other natural materials such as clay and ceramic tiles, the clear and artistic expression of structure in the exposed rafters and purlins, and the artistry of the design of such details as the rafter ends.

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The stylistic qualities that came to be associated with and definitive of the Craftsman style that are in full expression in the depot are the low, deeply overhanging roof supported on exposed rafters, knee braces and brackets, the shed dormers, and the decoratively cut rafter ends. The doubling and stacking of the rafters, and the elegance of their decoratively cut ends on the depot represent the highest level of Craftsman design, comparing favorably with that of California's finest practitioners, the Greene Brothers, of Pasadena. (See historical photo number 21.) Many large Craftsman structures were clad in shingles that were stained rather than painted. In Willits we see an interesting variation on this theme in the use of varnished redwood siding.

The exemplification of the Craftsman ethic and the high level of Craftsman design continue in the interior of the depot. The exposed ceiling beams with their carved brackets asserted the structure here. The clear-finished heart redwood paneling (now painted) expressed the materials. The ceramic tile fireplace facing and the stenciling on the frieze (also now painted, but restorable) exemplified the artistic and handcrafted qualities of the style. These features can best be seen in the historical photos number 22 and 23.

The Craftsman design ethic as reflected in the details and features cited above mark the Willits Depot as a unique expression of the Craftsman style in California railroad architecture. Though a modification of a Southern Pacific Common Standard plan, it was repeated nowhere else on the far-flung S.P. system in the state. Indeed, exhaustive research in period railroad journals coupled with statewide study of railroad architecture reveals that no other California railroad ever produced a depot that so exemplified the Craftsman style.<sup>2</sup>

Current research indicates that the architect who drafted the design for the Willits depot was D.J. Patterson, an in-house architect for Southern Pacific. Besides a number of Southern Pacific stations elsewhere in the S.P. system, Patterson also designed several stations on the NWP after 1907. The Willits station buildings, however, are unique to the NWP which, as a whole, owned depot buildings representing a plethora of design backgrounds. This pattern of development of the NWP stations is not atypical from the rest of Southern Pacific's railroads. As was true for many of the lines eventually absorbed into the Central Pacific/Southern Pacific system, the NWP evolved piecemeal from the 1860s, as reflected in the variety of styles and types of the stations along its main and branch lines, each designed to suit the potential traffic of its particular community. They ranged from small passenger shelters, to freight sheds, and to large complexes of well-designed structures serving passengers and freight. The Willits depot complex, however, stands out as one of the most attractive on the NWP, and a highly individualistic architectural expression from a company that had, by the time of its design and construction, become a fortress of standardization.

It remains unclear whether company forces or a local contractor built the buildings. Some have credited Willits contractor Dan DeShiell with building the station structures. DeShiell was a prominent local builder who was responsible for a number of vernacular Craftsman homes in Willits. However, there is no firm evidence that DeShiell built the NWP station. The few extant documents concerning his career do not mention the station. One would expect that a construction project of this importance would have received considerable attention in any biographical sketch of DeShiell, but it is absent from the historical record. Muddying the historical waters, however, is that fact that he is known to have designed the office of the Northwestern Redwood Company in 1915, which incorporates both Craftsman and Mission Revival elements, and which was linked to the interim depot design reported in August of that year. This building is

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with John W. Snyder, (February 3, 1999).

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diagonally across the tracks from the Willits station. However, this is the only documented connection DeShiell had with A.W. Foster.

The NWP was able to enjoy its expansive prosperity only to the 1920s. Though new mills were built and existing mills expanded in the first years of that decade in response to the improved shipping offered by the railroad, redwood lumber operations in the region ran into a problem of excess production by the mid-1920s. As a result the Northwestern Redwood Company closed its newly-expanded mill in Sherwood Valley in 1926; the Irvine and Muir Lumber Company purchased the mill, but apparently did not re-open it for a number of years. Lumber from the Union Lumber Company in Fort Bragg, shipped to Willits via the California Western Railway, continued to provide some of the freight for the NWP, and passenger traffic from tourists visiting the redwood country also remained a source of valuable revenue. However, as the popularity of the automobile expanded dramatically from the 1920s and even through the Great Depression, competition for tourist dollars increasingly favored the family car over the railroad. More ominously, as early as 1920 the *Willits News* reported on the rise of shipping by truck, and on the use of short-haul buses. Though the railroad-fostered building boom continued in Willits, more highway-related matters began to appear on the pages of the paper. Beginning about 1914 and continuing through the 1930s, the state highway from Sausalito to Willits (then called State Route 1) underwent major improvements, with completion through to Eureka finally achieved in 1921. Given the unofficial name of the "Redwood Highway," it became the major route for auto tourism to California's northwest coast. Completion of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937 opened the route to greatly increased traffic, as San Franciscans who previously had to use auto ferries or a highly circuitous route around the Bay now had a direct route north by car or bus.

The Southern Pacific bought Santa Fe's share of the Northwestern Pacific in 1929, but the line still suffered through the 1930s and the Great Depression, abandoning most of its branch lines and curtailing service throughout the line. Nor did the NWP enjoy a great recovery after World War II, since by then the automobile had established its supremacy in the tourism industry in the redwood country. In 1959 the NWP received permission from federal and state authorities to terminate its conventional passenger service between San Rafael and Eureka, replacing it with a single diesel-powered rail car that ran twice weekly between Willits and Eureka from 1959 to 1971; with the creation of Amtrak in April 1971, all passenger service ceased on the Northwestern Pacific. While lumber production stimulated by the postwar building boom of the 1950s that continued more modestly through the 1970s supported freight operations, the NWP continued to struggle; disastrous floods in December 1964 closed the railroad between Willits and Eureka for a year, and tunnel fires in ensuing decades did the same thing. In 1984 the NWP obtained permission to abandon the section of the railroad between Willits and Eureka; an independent short line, the Eureka Southern, then took over this northern end of the old NWP main line. The Northwestern Pacific today is still operating, though largely limited to hauling lumber on an irregular basis.

Through all these travails, the Willits depot has remained the town's center of railroad activity, a focal point that has seen the local ladies' band greeting arriving passenger trains in the teens; has seen much of the town's population gather to watch the circus arrive and depart by train through the 1920s and 1930s; has welcomed and served and fed passengers, whether arriving on business, passing through to the north or south, or merely as tourists taking in the local natural wonders; has served train crews hauling the region's wealth out, and bringing goods for the world's markets into the region. It was the point of departure for many of the region's young men during the world wars, greeted them on their safe return, and witnessed the passage of staggering amounts of strategic wood materials during those years. During 1921 alone, more than 34,000 California Western passengers passed through the Willits depot, many of whom caught NWP

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trains to San Francisco or Eureka. In 1921 the California Western even inaugurated Pullman sleeping car service whereon passengers could board at 9 PM in Fort Bragg and wake up in Sausalito at 9:05 the following morning, in time to catch the ferry for a full business day in San Francisco (the service lasted just eight years before improved roads and automobiles caused its demise). Today, facing restoration, it remains the center of tourism in Willits, serving the passengers riding the excursion trains of the California Western Railway between Willits and Fort Bragg. For many who step between the stout pillars of the verandah to board the trains, and who later return to the shadowed shelter it offers from summer heat and winter rains, the depot epitomizes Willits and remains a memorable link that draws many to return.

The Willits depot, restaurant, and baggage buildings retain a remarkably high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. There have no significant alterations to the exterior of the buildings. Although the interiors of the waiting room and lunch room have had other uses inserted, most of the original fabric remains. The complex is significant at the local level under criterion A for its association with the growth of the redwood lumber industry in the California northwest and as reflected in its construction, and with the growth and development of Willits in the 1901-1925 period. Still in full passenger service, it is one of the few depots in California that has been in continuous use since its completion. It is also significant under criterion C at the state level as the finest known expression of Craftsman-style railroad architecture in California. The only other railroad-related features still extant in Willits are: the tracks, including a wye one to two blocks north of the depot--the only extant feature of the Sherwood Branch; a small timber trestle crossing Broaddus Creek south of the depot; and a 1964 water tank on the California Western, approximately 1/4 mile south of the depot. No elements of the former engine terminal or freight depot facilities remain.



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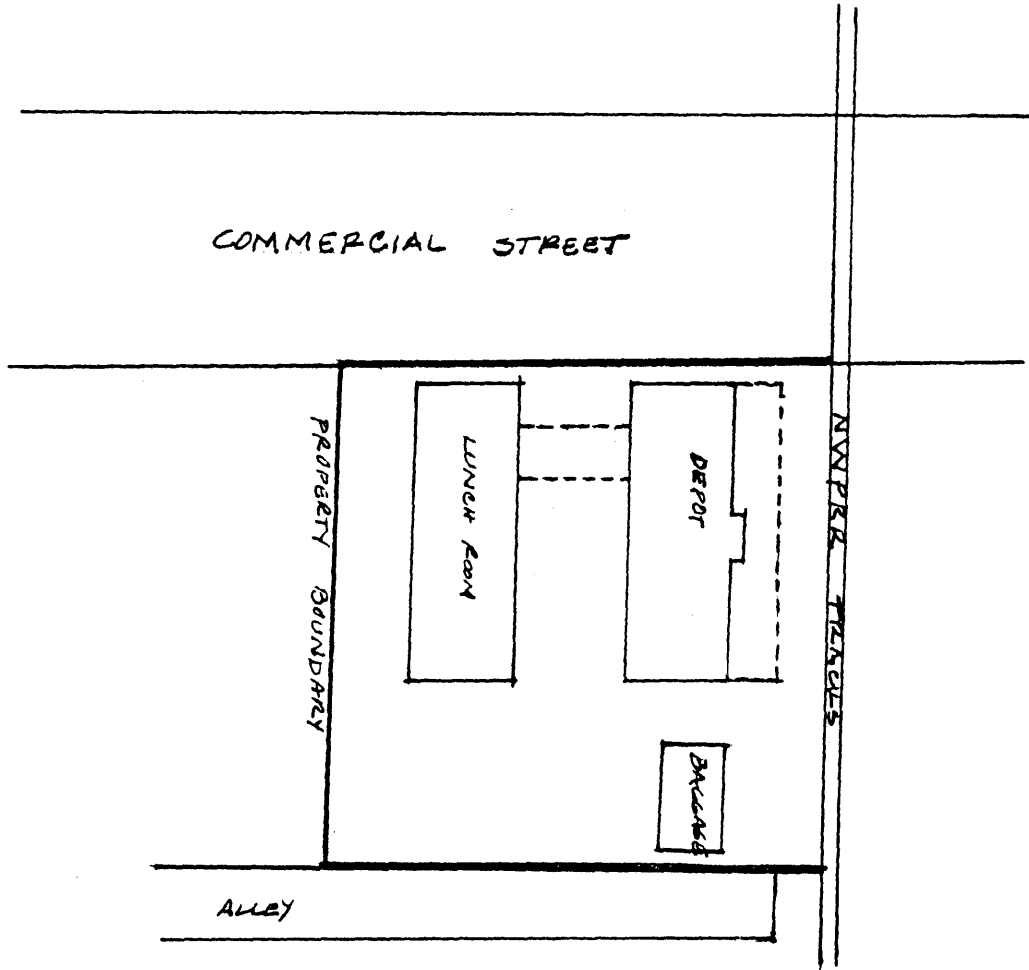
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Property Boundary Map



SCALE: 100 FT TO 1 INCH  
100 0 100 200 300