



All Aboard for the Lee St. Local!
By Scott Fletcher
Marin History Museum Volunteer

In 1905, the Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway built a feeder line from upper Blithedale Canyon to the North Shore Railroad Depot in downtown Mill Valley. This not only served residents' local needs but also connected them with the North Shore Railroad trains that ran south to Sausalito where riders could connect with the ferry to San Francisco. The first conveyance was a small six-seat gasoline railcar, converted from an open Thomas Flyer, and known as "The Black Maria." There were stops at Marsh Dr., King St., the Blithedale Hotel (near today's Cottage Ave.), and Bigelow Ave. (now Eldridge). The mile-long ride cost patrons a nickel and took just under 10 minutes. The fare was raised to a dime in 1917.

In July of 1906, Richard Warfield, Vice-President of the railway, a Civil War Veteran and Police Commissioner was killed on the Lee St. Local line while riding 'The Black Maria.' He was on his way to meet his son Emerson near the King St. stop when the coach collided with another train on the line which destroyed the 'Black Maria.'

After this tragic accident, 'The Dinky' became the Lee St. Local's passenger train. It was a small, tank steam-engine that pulled a wooden coach behind with twelve rows of seats. From the downtown depot the engine backed up the grade pushing the coach behind and then ran forward down the canyon. Although the Lee St. Local revenue could never match its expenses, residents and town officials successfully fought a number of efforts through the years by the successor rail company, the Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway to discontinue the line. Not only did the 'local' time its arrival in downtown Mill Valley with outgoing and incoming Northwestern

Pacific trains (the former North Shore Railroad), but local schoolchildren could ride the train to and from their homes in Blithedale Canyon.

In 1916, 'The Dinky' was replaced by the railcar pictured above which was known as "The Kissel Kar." It was another gas-powered vehicle built by the Kissel Motor Car Company whose dealership was at Van Ness and Geary in San Francisco. A turntable at Lee St. replaced the old siding for 'The Dinky' and used to turn the Kissel Kar around. Ridership slowly declined over the years, partly due to the increase in automobile use and the unreliability and "temperament" of the Kissel Kar which often failed on cold mornings.

By 1926 the Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway, experiencing decreased ridership and financial difficulty, ended the service of the Lee St. Local. The recently opened Ridgecrest Toll Road had opened Mt. Tamalpais to automobile traffic in 1925 and two devastating fires in 1923 and 1929 had damaged the railroads' Tamalpais Tavern and destroyed much of its tracks on the mountain. In 1929, the Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway folded and passed into memory.

(December 19, 2023)

Photo ID no. P1999.1633