

How The Shay Survived

 web.archive.org/web/20210211070943/http://sierraloggingmuseum.org/shay-locomotive-status/the-survival-story-of-ysl-no-4

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The survival of Yosemite Lumber Co. Shay No. 4 was a matter of unusual luck. In 1943, in the middle of WWII, the Yosemite Sugar Pine Lumber Company, the successor to Yosemite Lumber Co., was bankrupt. They sold No.4 to Levin Scrap, a scrap dealer in Stockton, California. The locomotive was almost 25 years old, although that's fairly young for a steam engine, and in pretty good condition. But it was to be melted down, perhaps to become part of a new battleship or tank for the war effort. However, when the war ended the Shay hadn't been scrapped. Perhaps it was harder, or took longer, than expected to get the engine down out of the mountains. Perhaps the price of scrap metal was going down, and the scrapper waited, hoping that the price would move back up. We don't know exactly why, but No. 4 survived the war despite the nation's need for metal.

With the war over, Levin Scrap, like many scrappers across America, went out of business. No. 4 was still sitting in their yard when the property was purchased by Davidson Scrap. Davidson collected used tires for tire recappers, which were companies that melted down worn-out tires and used the re-cycled rubber to put new tread on tires that still had some life in them. As the company accumulated a stock of old tires, a tire pile began to grow. Within several years, the tire pile had grown into a tire mountain, covering the scrap left by the previous owner, including No. 4. The engine sat buried and, eventually, forgotten. Through the decades of the fifties and sixties, when most railroad steam engines were melted down, No. 4 slumbered under the weight of its tire cocoon.

In the 1970's, the Environmental Protection Agency ordered the removal of the mountain of tires. The surprise came as the last of the pile was cleared away revealing a Shay locomotive sitting quietly where it had been parked for more than thirty years. One of the Stockton papers carried a picture of the patient No.4's first light —



News of the hidden locomotive reached a group in Heber City, Utah who needed an engine for the tourist railroad, the Heber Creeper, they were putting together. They examined No. 4 and found it in good shape. They quickly brought it back to life pulling tourists instead of timber, but it wasn't popular. The problem? Shay locomotives are designed to pull very heavy loads at very slow speeds. Tourists didn't find much excitement creeping along at six or seven miles per hour. Once again, No. 4 was out of work.

The Nevada State Railroad Museum stepped in to purchase the locomotive and move it to their facility in Boulder City, Nevada. There they operated it occasionally, but eventually the museum realized that they didn't need it for their permanent collection, and they parked it, unneeded, in the hot, dry air of the desert.

In 2002, the Sierra Nevada Logging Museum began to look for a working logging locomotive that could demonstrate the sights and sounds of a real timber railroad. A Shay was considered most representative of California logging history. Eventually, the search led to YLCo No. 4 at Boulder City. It was old, but it had been in operating condition right up to the time the NSRM shut it down and parked it. The dry desert air had arrested most deterioration. The boiler seemed to be in good shape, and it was obvious that it had been maintained well during its working life in the woods. Most important, a thorough inspection suggested that it could be restored at a reasonable cost. The two museums struck a deal and, in 2004, more than sixty years after it came down out of the mountains to be melted into scrap, No. 4 moved back home to the Sierras.

The original hope of the people bringing the Shay to the Logging Museum was that someday it would be running for short distances somewhere near the museum. That isn't going to happen, at least as long as the locomotive is at the museum. The locomotive sits by White Pines Lake, a domestic water supply, and it is on property owned by the Calaveras County Water District. They have made it very clear that the locomotive is never going to be fired up on their property. As this revision is written, a CalTrans grant is being used to renovate the boiler and the plan is to finally run the locomotive a short distance on compressed air.



YSL Shay No.4 upon completion of its first ultrasonic boiler inspection. The boiler front, boiler tubes, boiler sheet metal and steam dome cover have been removed for the inspection, slightly changing the Shay's normal profile. Some of the boiler tubes that were removed are visible on the ground at right in the photo. The honeycombed panel inside the smoke box is the front tube sheet, which will be replaced and moved about a half-foot further back into the boiler. Restoration will begin when grant funds are released by CalTrans — soon, we hope.